

**Self-writing around 1900 –  
Fractured identities in New York City**

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## Introduction – Self-writing as practice and (dis-)identification

More than any other city New York is the American city. It is our imperial capital [...] In New York are the great publishing houses of books and magazines. There, more than in any other city and in the metropolitan area, live the men who write – those who write the books, who edit and direct the magazines. Of course, most of these writers and editors go to New York from the country and bring their country-bred culture. But New York refines it, stamps it as its own, nationalizes our culture – which still, for all the image and superscription of New York, is our national culture [...] Probably no other nation in the world is more closely in touch with its capital than is America with New York. Yet, to know America, a foreigner must leave New York; and, to know his country, the American must go there.<sup>1</sup>

The renowned journalist, writer, and newspaper editor William Allen White was a champion of small-town ideals and Middle America. In his 1937 article *Imperial City*, for one of the last editions of the popular magazine *Literary Digest*, – however – he crowns New York City as the *real* capital United States. Moreover, he thinks of New York City as *the* symbol of American individualism. Individualism in New York City – and in American culture in general – is a key concept – hence it is intertwined with what this study focuses on, identity, the self, and writing at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century. In fact, the years around 1900 are what reshaped New York City into the symbol of American Individualism written about by White in 1937.

From the late 1880s onward, New York City changes rapidly becoming a city of moral contradictions. Jacob Riis photographed horrific scenes of New York slums for the *Evening Sun*. An abundance of reform societies surveilled the city and their agents' persecuted indecent behavior, immorality, and vice, while slumming was at the same time advertised in popular guidebooks for tourists. Philanthropists organized numerous organizations to fight prostitution and pornography, and at the same time Margaret Sanger campaigned for contraception and the liberation of women. The gap between very poor and extremely rich New Yorkers grew along with a similar divide between the virtuous and the vulgar. No doubt New York City underwent various cultural, political, and economical changes that questioned people's identities. Individualism around 1900 was intertwined with notions of democracy, freedom, and independence and as a consequence it affected relations to other citizens and non-citizens. This becomes vividly apparent with re-emerging and historically powerful specific American concepts of the self, as illustrated in various popular demands to it: self-determination, self-government, self-reliance, the self-made man, and self-sufficiency. Individuality in faith and economics, for one, propelled a deep mistrust of external authorities,

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<sup>1</sup> William Allen White, "Imperial City," *The Literary Digest*, October 16, 1937, 13–14.

like the state, for example – and as a consequence was intertwined with belonging – who was perceived fit to be included and excluded in the urban metropolis.

This was especially the case for economic individualism, shaped by the idea of a manifest destiny of going West, which produced a distinct frontier individualism. The market revolution, with its ensuing industrialization, materialized economic individualism in new ways in New York City around 1900. Race, class, age, religion, gender, and various other categories of difference defined individual identities for this reason. In 1896, for example, the Plessy v. Ferguson decision insured that individual identity was defined by race.<sup>2</sup> Chinese, Italian, Mexican, Irish, and Jewish immigrants were the antithesis of American Individualism. Republican individualism was associated with white men in particular. From this *mélange*, a distinctly urban American Individualism emerged – one that provided the necessity for the production of identity categories. This furthermore propelled various practices to understand, produce, reshape, devise, appropriate, and construct one's identity. One of these practices was writing.

### *Topic and Questions*

The following four chapters will analyze the practice of what I call self-writing, by which four individuals – Ralph Werther a self-described androgyne, as well as journalist Elizabeth Jane Cochran, better known as Nellie Bly, novelist James Weldon Johnson and social reformer Richard Ward Greene Welling – all wrote themselves in varying ways into being. I will focus on how their practice of writing shaped and transformed their self-identifications and, furthermore, what this can tell us on a macro-historical level about the understanding of identity and subjectivity in turn-of-the-century New York City in general.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore analyze their practice of self-writing with an approach that is able to extrapolate the implicit knowledge of the everyday practices of the “temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings,”<sup>4</sup> and more specifically ask the two following questions: a) How has this everyday practice of self-writing shaped & informed the authors' understanding of identity? And b) How were the presented self-identifications connected to established normative categories of differentiation around 1900 in New York City?

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<sup>2</sup> Felix Krämer and Nina Mackert, “Plessy Revisited, Skizzen dekonstruktivistischer Körpergeschichte(n) von den Vereinigten Staaten der Segregation,” in *Verqueerte Verhältnisse, Intersektionale, Ökonomiekritische und strategische Interventionen*, eds. AG Queer Studies (Hamburg: Mönnich Verlag, 2009), 66-81.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Macro-historical level’ refers to the interplay between the practice of writing on a micro-historical level, and the efficacy of macro-historical discourse formations, like, for example, late-nineteenth century medico-legal discourse formations.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Schatzki, *Social Practices, A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 89. Cited in Sven Reichardt, “Praxeologische Geschichtswissenschaft. Eine Diskussionsanregung,” *Sozial. Geschichte* 22, no.3 (2007): 44.

Writing was at the core of everyday life for these four writers in New York City. I argue that writing was, for these four writers, one of their practices in which they anticipate — partly realized — disseminated, repudiated and annihilated (im-)possible subject positions to varying degrees. Subject positions are understood here as socially idealized versions of categories like, for example, man and woman, by which hegemonic power relations are (re-)produced and dispersed. How then did people that did not fit into categories like male or female, black or white, come to “know oneself” and what kind of “techniques of the self”<sup>5</sup> were used in order to determine their identity? One of these techniques at the end of the late nineteenth century was the practice of writing. It was an important everyday practice of self-negotiation and introspection for the authors. More precisely, this thesis is interested in how their practices created possibilities to (dis-)identify with hegemonic subject positions. The notion of disidentification and with it the theoretical framework will be explained further below. Over the course of time, identities unfolded in *and* through the writer’s texts analyzed here; they were manifold and changing, sometimes rapidly changing, for example, from one gendered, racialized and classed identity and self-understanding to the other in only one paragraph, as we will see with the example of Ralph Werther’s *The Autobiography of an Androgyne*. In James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the practice of writing seemed like an elaborated intellectual and political strategy to show what is missing in categories like black and white. With Nellie Bly’s three articles, *Women Journalists*, *Women Behind Asylum Bars* and *Inside the Madhouse*, the practice of writing was, by contrast, more related to the possibilities of gendered identities and their class relatedness. In Richard Ward Greene Welling’s unpublished diaries, the practice of writing was intertwined with an ethnic drag practice for a festive occasion at a high society ball that only lasted for one evening.

The practice of writing as a focus of interest may be manifold and extent to many perspectives. The practice theory approach is, for example, interested in the materiality of the tools used for certain practices. Different questions can be asked, such as: What kind of paper, journal, or notebook was used by the writer? Or, did the writer use a pen or a typewriter for that matter?<sup>6</sup> This thesis, however, will focus on the relations between the writers’ perception of who they were, and how they made sense of themselves without having adequate subject positions to align to. In short, the overall anchors of this thesis are best described through

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984, Vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (The New Press: New York, 1997), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Lucas Haasis and Constantin Rieske, *Historische Praxeologie, Dimensionen vergangen Handelns* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015). See Haasis’ and Rieske’s exemplary introduction of eighteenth century seaman Johan Pohl’s writing exercises.

engagement with the following three points of interest: the practice of writing, the aligning of subjectivation processes, and making of oneself in New York City. There are many other practices that the authors used. Focusing on the practice of writing allows for the inclusion of others practices in their representation as well. Mainly, this study will focus on their testimonies as to their views on impersonation, passing, cross- and ethnic-dressing practices.

The practice of writing as analyzed here spans mainly from 1887 to 1911. Werther's *Autobiography*, although published in 1918 in the *New York Medico-Legal Journal*, was written in 1899; Bly's articles were written and published in the *New York World* newspaper in 1887; Johnson wrote his novel from 1905–1911, and it was published by *Sherman, French & Company* in 1912; and Welling's diary entries were written in 1897, though they were never intended for publication. The writers chosen for this study do not fit into any easily recognizable group, or for that matter categorization. But, rather than focusing on, for example, African American authors in isolation, or on so-called women journalists, androgynes, or social reformers as a distinct group of people prior to the last turn-of-the-century in New York City and asking how they governed themselves, I have chosen four authors that share at first glance no similarities whatsoever apart from two facts: first, they reflected identity formations through their practice of writing and second, their lives and writings were directed at and entangled with New York City, the City that had been perceived contemporarily as the writer's city, a city where literature rose to the paramount art form.<sup>7</sup> All of the above writers moved to New York City from various mid-sized cities or small towns in the United States. But they, thirdly, and most importantly, challenged a developing regime with codes and registers that consistently mapped people by "the congruence of place, class, labor, body and physiognomy, language, customs and (ethnic) identity."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the authors presented here were part of what historians depicted as the changing environment in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Each one of them made a special effort through the practice of writing to assess the interplay between self-perception and the historical context in which they lived.

### *Timeframe*

The four writer's texts analyzed here were written in what was contemporarily and in its aftermath historically rendered as the Gilded Age and later the Progressive Era. Both eras were recognized as encompassing vast cultural and technological changes. Individuals were

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<sup>7</sup> Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 147, 150, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes, Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) XI.

confronted with these changes and dealt differently with them. The historical period of the Gilded Age was named after Mark Twain's novel, which satirized the greed and political corruption of antebellum America.<sup>9</sup> The title of Twain's novel became synonymous with the middle portion of the Victorian era in Britain and the Belle Époque in France and was primarily associated with the time period from the 1870s to the late nineteenth century. In terms of writing, the Gilded Age saw a considerable tide of popular and social-scientific writing, whereas the Progressive Era was often characterized by reform-minded American journalism.<sup>10</sup> Ballard C. Campbell described both eras as "a frenetic release of energy [which] ran through the United States between the end of the Civil War (1865) and World War I (1917)."<sup>11</sup> Both eras saw a dramatic, accelerated growth of industrialization; new forms of consumption emerged, and inventions like electric lighting, telephones, tube mail, and typewriters changed the landscape.<sup>12</sup> While things and institutions that became important for the practice of writing like printed materials, libraries and universities proliferated, traditional beliefs of identity changed and were challenged. It was thus not only the physical world that changed. Perceptions of what people thought about themselves changed as well – or, to phrase it another way, how people *could* make sense of oneself in a rapidly changing world in the first place.

In contrast to an American modernity associated with and "conceived as identifiable, definite, and durable sets of concrete institutions, social actors, social movements, and coherent programs," Thomas Welskopp and Alan Lessoff have posited an idea of a fractured modernity.<sup>13</sup> Their introduction to their edited volume *Fractured Modernity* furthermore singles out the fractured experiences and fractured histories of an American modernity, or, as Norbert Finzsch sums it up, "a multifaceted, incoherent whole, a 'fractured' landscape full of ruins of former times and permanently under construction."<sup>14</sup> Thinking of the modern landscape as fractured proves to be valuable for an inquiry into turn-of-the-century self-

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age, A Tale of Today* (Chicago: American Publishing Company, 1873).

<sup>10</sup> In relation to writing in the Gilded Age, muckraking was one key practice of attacking institutions and (political) leaders through this new form of journalism. The modern terminology is investigative journalism. Authors like Ida M. Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Ray Stannard Baker, and the magazines *McClure's*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Munsey's Magazine* were amongst the most widely circulated and read. Muckraking magazines become popular and played a highly visible role during the Progressive period from the 1890s to the 1910s. More often muckraking was understood as a Progressive Era practice, but with the example of Nellie Bly analyzed here the start of the muckraking journalism can be traced back to the 1880s.

<sup>11</sup> Ballard C. Campbell, *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (Wilmington: SR Books, 2000), XIV.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis, A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004, [1989]).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Welskopp and Alan Lessoff, *Fractured Modernity, America Confronts Modern Times, 1890s to 1940s* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



writing practice and subjectivation processes in New York City. Understanding modernity as “components [that] recombine in varying ways in different places and situations and among different groups and movements”<sup>15</sup> has consequences for the subjectivation processes analyzed here. I argue that starting with the notion of a fractured modernity, or, in other words, a modernity understood rather “as an attitude than a period of history,”<sup>16</sup> can productively address the self-writing practices analyzed here without preconceiving what these people have done as modern. Just because the authors lived and published in a certain time period does not make a text or an author modern. In the texts analyzed here, the identities produced through the authors’ self-writing practices were unquestionably fractured – to varying degrees. They are ‘fractured’ in the sense that different identities were thoroughly thought through and elaborated in their works. Sometimes this meant changing from one identity to another in just one paragraph, revealing the fluidity of self-identifications. Starting with these deliberations helps in separating “*claims* to modernity from the social, cultural, and political arrangements”<sup>17</sup> from the actual practices and subjectivation processes. Hermeneutically, this thesis addresses in this way what Michel Foucault called “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.”<sup>18</sup> Applying the image of a fractured modernity and moving away from historical monolithic bloc of understanding American modernity as a distinctive period of history as a result, then, questions the underlying identities that were negotiated in the texts analyzed here. It furthermore puts into question and focuses, thus, on a mode of relating to a reality that was contemporarily shaped through racialized, gendered, and classed subjectivation processes, as we will see in the following chapters.

### *Subjectivity and Identity*

The concept of the subject has a long history rooted in the modern era of philosophy starting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Philosophical approaches in this era were focused on the subject as a pivotal figure of political, economical, and religious ideas and thoughts. With, for example, René Descartes, but also with German Idealism as propelled by Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, the subject was thought of as an entity of self-consciousness and self-reflection. Within social philosophical strains, as well as in moral philosophical thoughts, the subject was understood as a single agent and irreducible starting point for social theory, as

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<sup>15</sup> Welskopp, *Fractured Modernity*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” XXXI.

<sup>17</sup> Welskopp, *Fractured Modernity*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” XXXI.

exemplified by Smith, Hume, and J. S. Mills. Romantic deliberations about the subject were then again defined as the place of expression of an inner core – an individual expression interacting with external forces. English and German Romanticism stimulated the transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, amongst others in the United States, to find their own spaces of inscription. These American transcendentalists in the nineteenth century argued that there is an ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical, as seen in Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* and *Song of Myself*, or in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* most prominently, both adapting "the quest of the introspective seeker to the landscapes, both rural and urban, of the American Republic in crisis and transformation."<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to long philosophical and poetical engagement with human subjectivity, the shaping of the concept and term identity is of a more recent date. The concept of identity in question here was born within a specific Western medico-legal concept of ordering, categorizing, numbering and counting.<sup>20</sup> Thus the term is an answer to the problem of the classic semantics of the subject: "From the moment, in which since the mid-nineteenth century with Marx, Comte, Nietzsche, Weber and others the semantics of an intrinsic dynamic and irreducible sociality was developed, a classic social scientific question arose – the question of the interrelatedness between 'society' and 'individuals,' if one perpetuates to think these terms in the subject-philosophical tradition, bound to an autonomy postulate. [BK]"<sup>21</sup> By analyzing the practice of self-writing of turn-of-the-century authors in New York City, one can thus see the changes of the possibilities of becoming an individual in actu. It shows how 'fragmented and fractured' identities were created in the late nineteenth century and, furthermore, how they came to be "constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography, A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Reckwitz's understanding of the concept of identity refers to an even earlier date, stressing the importance of the shaping of the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology from the 1940s to the 1970s. Alexander Reckwitz, "Subjekt/Identität, Die Produktion und Subversion des Individuums," in *Poststrukturalistische Sozialwissenschaften*, eds. Stephan Moebius and Andreas Reckwitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 76.

<sup>21</sup> Reckwitz, "Subjekt/Identität," 2008, 76. "Diskurstheoretisch antwortet der Begriff jedoch auf ein Problem der klassischen Semantik des Subjekts: In dem Moment, in dem seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts mit Marx, Comte, Nietzsche, Weber und anderen Autoren Semantiken eigendynamischer, irreduzierbarer Gesellschaftlichkeit entwickelt werden, ergibt sich als klassische sozialwissenschaftliche Problemstellung die Frage nach der Konfrontation dieser 'Gesellschaft' mit den 'Individuen,' wenn man diese weiterhin in der subjektphilosophischen Tradition denkt und an das Autonomiepostulat koppelt."

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, "Introduction, Who Needs 'Identity'?", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4.

[I]dentities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might present ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

In *Questioning Cultural Identity*, an edited volume by Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall from which this quote comes, Hall not only insists on the processes of becoming in which identities are constantly shaped, but, furthermore, asks who, then, needs identities in the first place. In the edited volume's introduction, Hall posits the question of why there was a discursive explosion around the concept of identity in the 1990s and, if that being so, why one should bother to carry on with the discussion between essentialist and constructivist schools of thought. His answer is an assessment of deconstructivist critique in which ethnicized, racialized, and national concepts of cultural identities shared one distinctive feature: Previous key concepts of identities and subjects were put under erasure without replacing them with new concepts. This critical interrogation of deconstructivist thought and approaches has not lost its value in contemporary research and is important information for this historical analysis of late nineteenth century self-writing practices. It seems paradoxical to try to get rid of identities as Hall – referring to Derrida – writes, because as soon as we do so, we are already caught in thinking about and in identities: “The line which cancels them, paradoxically permits them to go on being read.”<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, his proposal was that writing about identities has always been a practice that allows focusing on the spaces between. This space between will be here the focus on the practice of writing; the practice that at once shapes and dissolves identity markers. The figure of thought brought up by Hall was the Foucauldian theory of the decentered subject, an approach that does not refer to the classic semantics of the subject with an irreducible inner core any longer. This approach no longer aims for an all-knowing subject, but rather takes into question the discursive and non-discursive practices that produce meaning. By focusing on these practices, the transcendental, all-knowing Cartesian subject only takes up a subordinate function. For a historical approach engaged with identities and subject processes, new questions arise: The first priority is no longer asking for genealogy or ancestry, but rather asking what the persons in question could be in the first place, how they have been represented, and how their practices shaped their self-making.

The subjectivation processes as analyzed here via late-nineteenth century self-writing practices is thus interested in the complex relations and modes between autonomy and heteronomy of the writers. Having said that, subjectivation – as understood here – relates not to a linear process of subjugation, but to a process that is able to extrapolate how people were able to become an individual through forging various identities within and through their

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, “Introduction, Who needs ‘Identity’?,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1.

works. Heteronomy and autonomy thus, in this case, means to focus on the burgeoning medical discourse in the late nineteenth century. What Foucault called the power of a truth regime at work was shaped through the efficacy of medical discourse.<sup>25</sup> A truth regime was created and dispersed, for example, by invoking the naturalness of the categories man and woman, black and white, abled and disabled, normal and abnormal, to name a few binary differentiations that come into focus here. Questioning a truth regime, then, as the four writers did in distinctive ways, meant to question the truth of oneself. People in late-nineteenth-century New York City could no longer be sure of the ability to speak truthfully about themselves, and hold themselves accountable, for various reasons. One of the reasons was that medical-legal discourse proliferated “social divisions brought about in the name of madness, illness, and delinquency, along with their effects on the constitution of a rational and normal subject.”<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, to speak truthfully about oneself was thus tied to self-identifying with what were deemed normal and rational subject positions, such as, for example, man or woman. Through medical-scientific discourses in the late nineteenth century, in addition, classes and categorizations of people gained an efficacy that Ian Hacking understood as the practice of making up people.<sup>27</sup> The list of people that were made up was long – a whole apparatus of people was invented and an inventory of ever more refined groups and subgroups of people emerged. Mad, insane, homo- and heterosexual, inverts, and androgynes, for example, emerged as classifications. However, this did not mean that people who were described, categorized, and classified in these ways were not around before. But, as Hacking furthermore argued, in late-nineteenth-century United States medical discourse, a statistics of deviance culminated, and with it a ‘dynamic nominalism’ producing ever more identity categorizations were established. Unquestionably, and emblematically, the making of the homo- and heterosexual divide, for example, as distinct identity categories, did not mean that there was no same sex, or different sex activities before it, but naming them as such, especially through medical scientific conceptions, articles, conferences, practices, and inventions, a shift from same-sex activities to same-sex *people* did indeed emerge. By making up ever more precise conceptions of sexual identities, as a consequence, new distinctions emerged. As soon as these distinctions emerged and were made up, new realities came into being. Each one of the self-writing practices as analyzed and exemplified here by the works of these four writers is intertwined with varying and highly diverse everyday realities. These realities thus shaped the relationships between their autonomy and heteronomy as a black

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, an Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” 81–85.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” 88.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” in *Reconstructing Individualism*, eds. T.L. Heller, M. Sosna, D.E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

writer, an *androgyn*e, and a so-called woman journalist, as well as via the omission of naming and categorizing, as seen in the case of Richard Ward Greene Welling, a white Euro-American man. One way for them was, from different angles for each one of them, and with the use of different writing techniques, to write and, in the end, produce, different realities than the narrow ideas about subjectivity that circulated in their lifetime and they encountered. What each one of them as a consequence achieved in the end and the text were able to represent was to question the limitations *and* possibilities of being in the world.

As a result, this did not mean that everybody resisted, or could resist these new distinctions, conceptions and classifications. It was not a simple and binary oppressor v. oppressed narrative, but rather a more complex situation, as I will demonstrate in the four chapters. Self-writing as analyzed here was only one element of the constitution of subjects. But as “subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts,”<sup>28</sup> focusing on the self-writing practice offers a lens into how people (self-)identified and came to be constituted as individuals in the late-nineteenth-century in New York City. Above all, the self-writing practice substantially challenged – as put forth by the authors in different genres of writing diaries, articles, novels, and autobiographies – the ideas of how the writers were perceived. They (dis-)identified with the given categories they were assigned to. In doing so, these writers told (non-)fictional stories that featured a constant rejection and adaption of scientific discourse and everyday assumptions of groups and individuals, that produced classes of people. Focusing on the subjectivation processes as produced through turn-of-the-century self-writing processes, then, entangles parts of the technique of individualizing and subjugating humans. Therefore, with a focus on the self-writings of the four authors in question here, it also becomes possible to observe the empowerment of subjects. Because, conversely, the invention of categories also shaped frameworks of possibilities, alternative doings, speech, and think acts. This becomes discernible by and within the self-writing practices seen here. This does not mean that people are solely forced into categories, but that self-writing practices always and constantly propelled an agency as well for the subject in question.

### *Disidentification*

Hegemonic subject positions are idealized versions of subjects. These idealized versions circulate through different discursive fields, which were partly repudiated by and with the help of the self-writings of the authors. In other words, their narratives clashed against

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gardner (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 97.

socially constituted definitions and categorizations of individuals. The self-writing practice of all four writers is therefore – in addition – accompanied by a disidentificatory practice. As much as identities were shaped by this self-writing practice, identities-in-difference emerged. José Esteban Muñoz understood disidentification as a process, as well as a practice and a survival strategy.<sup>29</sup> A survival strategy in the sense that it propelled minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere. Werther, for example, as a self-perceived effeminate man had to confront phobic majoritarian public spheres without doubt. Werther's practice of writing, with its subsequent production of a male writer's identity in his texts, can hardly be considered a minority subject practice. But, in relation to his other practices such as, for example, cruising through the streets and cross-dressing, it nonetheless was a survival strategy for him, because with his everyday practice he could contemplate, write and make sense of his self-perception. At first glance, he could do this within the confines of the *Medico-Legal Journal*, the same journal that helped to propel and shape distinct categorizations and binaries like normal and abnormal, hetero- and homosexual, and man and woman. Moreover, through his self-writing practice and the constant references to a writer's identity in his texts, Werther questioned the late-nineteenth-century processes and principles of classification and intelligibility, which established a right to exist for those identities that were formed in response to the burgeoning cultural logics and logistics of heteronormativity.<sup>30</sup> Binary categorizations of gender and sexuality – man and woman, homo- and heterosexual – were gaining traction through medical professionalization and its concurrent inventions of a natural order of disorders in the late-nineteenth-century.

In contrast to the self-writings of Werther, Bly, and Johnson, the diary entries of social reformer Richard Ward Greene Welling, in which he described his festive ethnic drag impersonation of a Native American leader for the Bradley Martin Ball, was much less a disidentification, as Muñoz understood it, but in the same manner brought to the foreground how people were made up, and thereby calls into question the efficacies and power structures of categories from a majoritarian subject position – that of a wealthy, white Euro-American man. The following chapters will thus analyze self-writing practices and how they shaped the authors' (dis-)identifications. It will show how the practice of writing by the four writers interrogated and questioned modern epistemologies of what humans can be in general. The practice of self-writing thus calls into question, as outlined above, modes of subjectivation. This, then, is associated with three other questions: First, how could writers in the late

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<sup>29</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications, Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," in *Privilege, A Reader*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), 83–98.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in New York City relate to themselves? Second, and equally important for this question, then, is the writer's relationship to New York City? Third, as every kind of identification is bound to other peoples' lives as well, how did their identity constructions relate to the societal networks they found themselves in?

As mentioned, Muñoz discussed the difference that queers faced and inhabited as identities-in-difference. All of these identities-in-difference emerged from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere.<sup>31</sup> In Muñoz's approach this failure in aligning themselves to given subject positions, as for example man or woman, leads to 'survival strategies.'<sup>32</sup> With this approach, Werther's survival strategy – as a person that had been perceived by society as an effeminate man – was the practice of writing. Although Muñoz's approach also understands these survival strategies as being propelled by minority subjects, I argue that identities-in-difference are not solely an outcome of minority subject practices. As Muñoz pointed out there are complex relations between minority subjects and minority culture, which always leads to complex and contradictory relations between dominant and minority identifications. This theoretical starting point can be questioned productively when we look at complex historical figurations of, for example, a female impersonator that happened to be also a white, devout, and literate man. Focusing on self-writing practices thus can, as a consequence, combine two investigations of subjectivity processes; first, the failed appellations of a female impersonator in a male-dominated society, and second, Werther's relationship to what Muñoz would call dominant identifications. Nonetheless Werther surely had "to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere,"<sup>33</sup> but was also as a historian posited "without doubt antifeminist."<sup>34</sup> Nellie Bly struggled to address herself as a so-called woman journalist. As there were not many women in 1880s journalism, women were understood first not for what they could do (write articles), or what their profession was, but were marked and categorized in gendered terms. The burgeoning gendered logics of late-nineteenth-century New York City deemed it improper for women to write. She had to negotiate her way into the male-dominated newspapers by sensationalizing her bodily emotions. James Weldon Johnson, started his professional career as a journalist and musical composer. But he was frustrated with both professions because they were limited in economical and creative liberties to address the problems of black identities in the United States. Johnson moved to New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century and became interested in other ways to write about black identity, therefore he went to Columbia

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<sup>31</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex with an Androgyne," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (2011): 100.

University to get an education under the tutelage of Brander Matthews in literature, and become what he named a ‘serious writer.’ Soon after enrolling at Columbia he started with his first novel project, which became *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Richard Ward Greene Welling was surely no minority subject in the way Muñoz understood this terminology. In the chapter on Welling’s self-writing practice, we can thus see the identity appropriation of what Muñoz might understand as a majority subject at work. But in questioning the practice of self-writing in conjunction with the emerging varying identities in the four works of the authors, it becomes discernable that these identities all emerged from failed interpellations.<sup>35</sup> The question then is: Are there necessarily more frequent failed interpellations when there are, as in the writers’ cases, no or very few options to identify with the historically specific subject positions of man and woman, black and white, abled or disabled? Along with this question, another question arises: Is it in the first place at all useful to think in terms of minority and majority subjects when analyzing subjectivity processes?

### *Difference*

Self-writing practices shaped, as I argue, temporarily stable identities. How was this connected to categories of difference, such as class, race, gender, age, religion and (dis-)ability? Melissa Stein, for example, has examined the racialized and gendered scientific discourse of the late-nineteenth-century United States. She analyzes how scientists naturalized racial difference and socio-political exclusion by insisting that the bodies of racial minorities were not fully male or female.<sup>36</sup> This relationship between science and its shifting uses of sex and gender to denote racial difference can be seen with the self-writing practices of the four writers. Scientific accounts of racial difference gained their efficacy through the professionalization of scientific discourse in the late-nineteenth-century. As much as science proved to be an important factor in disseminating racial difference and, thereby, racialized identities, popular culture helped to reproduce and reify racial difference. Werther wrote in his *Autobiography*, for instance, about plantation songs he sang cruising through the streets of New York City. Bly’s spectacular stunt-reporting for the *New York World* would not have been possible without her travel story to Mexico. Through her ethnicized and racialized descriptions of Mexicans, she could distance herself from the male journalists at home, while

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<sup>35</sup> “Louis Althusser,” Last modified May 4, 2016. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/althusser/> “This account of how a human being becomes a self-conscious subject was published in an essay titled “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970). It was excerpted from a larger essay titled “On the Reproduction of Capitalism.” This work analyzed the necessary relationship between state and subject such that a given economic mode of production might subsist. It includes not only an analysis of the state and its legal and educational systems, but also of the psychological relationship which exists between subject and state as ideology.”

<sup>36</sup> Melissa N. Stein, *Measuring Manhood, Race and the Science of Masculinity 1830 1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



at the same time operating with the same racialized speech acts that shaped journalistic endeavors to a certain degree back at home in the United States. Johnson used the classic genre of the novel, which was predominantly male and white, to establish an unnamed protagonist, the Ex-Colored Man, heightening “our attention to the imbrications of these two discursive processes” of gender identification as well as race.<sup>37</sup> The preparation of an impersonation of a Native American leader from the seventeenth century, Miantonomoh, as described in Welling’s diaries, produced a one-dimensional representation of Native American manhood that masked the ruthless treatment of Native Americans. In addition to the efficacies of the categories gender and race, the interrelatedness of other categories of difference – for example, class, religion, and (dis-)ability – will be focused on as well. As mentioned above, differences were shaped by scientific discourse, and popular culture, but also influenced, shaped, produced and contested by everyday practices of individuals. The self-writing practice analyzed here will, therefore, extend to other fields in which the medico-legal reasoning of the doings and sayings of individuals are dispersed.

Writing, and the circumjacent practices of walking, reading, and watching, are necessary tools to evaluate, process, and constantly negotiate an identity. This negotiation process was deeply entrenched with contemporary ideas and perceptions of class, race, gender, age, (dis-)ability, and religion. The many identity processes this study follows in the analysis of the four writers’ texts indicated being constantly different from the ideas of discursively fixed categories such as man and woman, as one example. Being different from discursively fixed gendered categories is intertwined with racialized and classified categories, evoking the rich history of difference, ranging from Audre Lorde’s theory of difference to Chela Sandoval’s differential consciousness and Jacques Derrida’s work on *différance*. Despite evoking dissimilar located circuits of signification, they are linkable by the fact that all “these different paradigms attempt to catalog sites of emergence,” as Muñoz points out by quoting Norma Alarcón. Alarcón synthesizes the aforementioned works by employing the idea of the identity-in-difference paradox.<sup>38</sup> When queers, queer bodies<sup>39</sup> are “locked out of

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<sup>37</sup> C. Riley Snorton, “Passing for White, Passing for Man, Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as Transgender Narrative,” in *Transgender Migrations, The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*, ed. Trystan T. Cotten (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Norma Alarcón, “Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 129. Cited in: Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> My understanding of queer bodies, of queerness refers to one of the founding texts of queer theory, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*. It is a way of life formed by various subcultural practices, alternative forms of networks and friendships, and representations thereof that willfully encompass and produces alternative modes of being and thereby identifications.

the halls of representation,”<sup>40</sup> how is it possible “to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity?”<sup>41</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz posed this important question for queer contemporary bodies and their identity performances. This is a question that is also valid and useful in the historical setting of the fractured modern times of the late Gilded Age and the early Progressive Era, especially when looking at urban-centered, industrialist turn-of-the-century New York City, where queer bodies were prone to being deciphered as hysterical, neurasthenic, and degenerate, and where representation also meant inventing, categorizing, and structuring identities.

### *Writing and the Self*

Self-writing, as Michel Foucault suggested, was part of the government of oneself and others in Greco-Roman culture. Taking notes, writing down the actions and impulses of the soul “as though we were to report them to each other,” and observation, all these elements “of writing in the philosophical cultivation of the self just before Christianity” were already to be found in Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>42</sup> In this depiction of what Foucault calls *ethopoietic* writing, the transformation of truth into *ethos* in the first two centuries is the overarching focus that was laid upon the practice of writing. For the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, and the Cynics, exercise (*askesis*), and the art of living (*tekhnē tou biou*) were traditional principles and they had long attached a great importance to them. But although remnants of these Greco-Roman principles are, after almost two thousand years, to be found in the writings this study is concerned with, like the usage of surrounding practices reading, rereading, meditating, conversing with oneself and others, they do not constitute a “narrative of oneself.”<sup>43</sup> More precisely, the narrative of oneself differed significantly from Greco-Roman culture, as indicated, for instance, by Thomas Augst in *The Clerk’s Tale*.<sup>44</sup> The idea of realizing an ideal of one’s self was deeply entrenched within a culture in which traditional, aristocratic norms and patterns had lost its authority and meaning.

As a result, the practice of writing was connected to a historically specific conception of independency and masculinity. In the Gilded Age, writing, as much as other practices as well, came to be bound up with leisure and consumerism in a commercializing society. Definitions of masculinity shifted away from traditional anchors in work and economic achievement,

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<sup>40</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, “Self Writing,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (The New Press, New York 1997), 207-222.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Etzemüller, *Biographien* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2012): 128–29.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale, Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

leading to new ways of reintegrating masculinity. White Euro-Americans often depicted Anglo-Saxons as a superior race, postulating an exceptionalism and greatness of Anglo-Saxon nations, which emphasized a love for independency, freedom, and a capacity for self-government as desirable virtues in clear contrast to the virtue of *aiskesis* of Greco-Roman culture. As a result, writers in the late nineteenth century propelled – amongst all the economic upheavals, labor radicalism, and rising levels of immigration – an individualism never before seen. The practice of self-writing was thus reintegrating burgeoning values like character formation and the project of self-development. Whereas Augst analyzes diary writing by clerks as a distinctive group, I have analyzed four late-nineteenth-century writers that may only loosely be clustered as a group. Their self-writing practice was used as a tool to forge their own identities by writing diaries, books, articles, and letters. In contrast, for instance, to the diaries of young men, they encountered identificatory thresholds, as they were in various ways the antithesis of markers of manliness. They had to survive a hostile public sphere as androgyne, woman, and African American man, establishing a distinctive disidentification in their self-writings. The last chapter uncovers a reverse disidentification. Within the last chapter on Welling, a white, Euro-American man and social reformer, his self-writing practice proved his masculinity in impersonating Miantonomoh, a man of an allegedly primitive race and thereby a ‘lesser man.’ Not unlike the practice of white minstrel performers in which “men stole song, speech, and gestures, of American slaves or free African Americans, to profit from turning black people into infantilized monsters of stupidity,”<sup>45</sup> Welling acquired colonial knowledge by othering, which Homi Bhabha understands as an ambivalent act of love and subjection.<sup>46</sup> Stereotypes of Native American customs and clothes were used by Welling to gain improved reputation, success, and visibility at a high-society ball, a distinctively exclusionary setting of an economic white elite in New York City.

The four writers in question followed neither an ethos of writing nor an art of living as a principle. Turn-of-the-century New York City was one of the economic centers of the Western hemisphere, and, thereby, every (dis-)identification through self-writing was shaped by a counterhegemonic artistic production within a capitalist society. This is one central differentiation between the practice of writing in the first two centuries of Greco-Roman culture and the practice of writing in New York at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Self-writing thus follows a long line of thought and

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<sup>45</sup> Greil Marcus, “Foreword to the 20th – Anniversary Edition,” in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) XI.

<sup>46</sup> Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994), 66-84; Annemarie Bean, “Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, circa 1890,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 171-91.

practice in Western culture, but rather than shaping a virtue and character, the practice of writing of the four authors focused on here was intertwined with the unspeakable, the hidden, the unsaid, and the not yet existing forms of subjectivities. Unlike Greco-Roman culture, turn-of-the-century New York City was a world where basic literacy skills were becoming standard and widespread in the nineteenth century. People were, moreover, socialized into a mass print culture that was shaped, as almost every other part of social life, by other virtues, namely the notions of self-control and self-government embedded within a distinctive Victorian ideal of what it meant to be a woman and a man, crystallized as will be seen in various tropes, such as the new woman and the self-made man.

### *Writing and New York City*

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were not many places in the United States where one could be a writer by day and a female impersonator at night, where a woman could become a famous girl-stunt reporter, an African American man could pave his way to become a distinguished novelist, and a social reformer could make headlines with an ethnic drag impersonation. The four writers were all part of an urban space that gave way to the mediacy of such experiences. Urban guidebooks propelled an image of New York City as “a museum of wonders”<sup>47</sup> with countless attractions, and with the exception of Chicago, no other city in this time period in United States conjured such connotations. As New York was one of the original thirteen colonies in America, it was founded as a hub of trade, and it still was an important place of transshipment. New York City had an important commercial exchange with the Old World, which led to a cultural blend – with diverse people, ethics, religions, habits, and tastes – seen almost nowhere else in the world. Yet, late-nineteenth-century American history was also a history of immigration, commercialization, segregation, and violence against Native Americans, African Americans, and countless others marked as non-Euro-American. Parallel to this history a narrative was shaped and enfolded: that of the land of opportunities. It had spread throughout the country and the world, and within this narrative, at the same time as lived realities and histories of Native Americans and African Americans were being erased, New York City became the gateway to an abundance of possibilities.

Cities are built with language, or, to put it another way, with writings, texts, and maps. In the early 1880s, commentators on New York “began to note the upward tendency of its architecture and the innovation of electricity which illuminated Broadway, from Union Square to Thirty-fourth Street, with the radiance of day.”<sup>48</sup> Whether it was the changing

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<sup>47</sup> S.S. Colt, *The Tourist's Guide through the Empire State* (Albany 1871), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham: New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1956), 205.

architecture, the new innovations, the “represented extremes of crowded living and social indifference which succeeding generations were not to see surpassed,”<sup>49</sup> or the consolidation to form Greater New York in 1898, each and every one of those events we know about because they were written about.<sup>50</sup> The plans written by architects, the zonal ordinances written by city officials, the guidebooks written by authors, the patent requests written by inventors, the abundance of investigative notes that the social reformers of the day left, the lengthy newspaper articles written about New York City – all these text-producing persons and institutions, produced along with themselves a “material place that becomes a medium of philosophical potential.”<sup>51</sup> The philosophical potential Walter Benjamin raised in his notes on the Arcades Project was linked to the experience of the city of Paris, and it might be raised for the experience of the city of New York as well – and take into question the provisional hypothesis whether the city was not merely backdrop for the self-writing practices analyzed here, but at times a necessary agent of change in its own right for the realization of temporarily acquired identities. New York City, for all four writers, was furthermore, a space under construction. They anticipated the city to be open for numerous possibilities, and their writings indeed revealed a constant negotiation of their identity in interplay with the city. For this reason, New York City is understood as a space of possibilities that reverberates within the writers’ imaginations. This imagining of possibilities suggests another tentative hypothesis: The writers’ imaginations and phantasies realized and reshaped actual places. In this sense the self-writing practice did not so much depict utopias in the sense of future spaces and subjects, but what Michel Foucault posits as heterotopias, sites that allowed for “intermediate experiences” and which can be understood as temporarily realized utopias.<sup>52</sup> Doubtless the specific location, the *real* place from which an author writes, for example the consul’s mansion in Puerto Cabello as in Johnson case, differs from Bly’s boarding-house desktop in New York City. Writing about the practice of self-writing thus needs to be aware of how and in which ways the City was an agent of change in its own right.

### *Writing between Reality and Fiction*

What this study focuses on is not the differentiation between *real* and *fictitious* persons, but the very processes that can be excavated between a micro-historical level of an individual’s practice of writing and the macro-historical discourse formations of which these persons are part and parcel, be they real or imagined. There is, for example, no clear-cut proof

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<sup>49</sup> Still, *Mirror for Gotham*, 205.

<sup>50</sup> We could have learned about it in another way, by listening to oral histories for example.

<sup>51</sup> Ether Romeyn, *Street Scenes, Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880-1924* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) XIII.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: The New Press 1998), 178.

of Werther's existence. In order to protect himself, he needed to adapt different names and hide his birth name. The reader of his autobiography was left in the unknown about his real name. In the text, we can see how the different identities he invented were separated from one another with much effort, so that, for instance, his work-colleagues would not know about his alter ego, Jennie June. Although efforts have been made for the last couple of decades to excavate his birth name, no court cases, birth certificates, or newspaper articles have been found yet that could vouch for his 'real' existence. To varying degrees, the question of reality and fictionality within and through the invented identities by the self-writings of the other authors must be raised as well. The protagonist in Johnson's *Autobiography* was deliberately disassociated from his own life. He published his novel anonymously and wanted it to be at the same time a "human document," as he called it.<sup>53</sup> This was partly for the same reason, to protect himself, but also and moreover, to stir interest and to leave the question of whether the *Autobiography* refers to a real author to the readers. Interestingly, this strategic and deliberate choice was necessary and foregrounded the fictionality of racialized identity formations. Nellie Bly, in contrast, raised the question of what women could be in the Victorian age in an urban environment. In her articles, she always had to refer to herself as a writer in hindsight. She often established within her articles a self-reflective role about her past, as an aspiring journalist, or she wrote about women who wanted and did break into male-dominated professions. Sometimes it seems that there was a fictive element in her articles when she depicted women that wanted to break into journalism, which was still uncommon in the 1880s. Completely at odds with all other self-writings was the preparation of Welling's cultural appropriation of a Native American leader, as seen in his diaries. Here the necessity of working with fictionalized identities has to be addressed from a different angle, as his subjectivity was not questioned by anyone. For Welling, as a white male social reformer, it was not necessary to work through the fiction and vagueness of inventing identities through the self-writings of the aforementioned authors. There was nothing existential, nor was it dangerous for him to impersonate Miantonomoh of the Narragansett people, for one evening. Quite the contrary — from his subject position, he was able to reaffirm and reproduce societal norms of hierarchies. His self-writing practice is, thus, an example of the power structures at work, in which – without naming and categorizing it as such – white male identities formed a prominent nexus in late-nineteenth-century New York City.

This is not to say that it does not matter if the person actually lived or was a figment of imagination in an author's mind. It is also not an attempt to blur the lines between fact and

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<sup>53</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), 238.

fiction as Eric Hobsbawm accused postmodernist tendencies in scholarship.<sup>54</sup> But, as I further argue, in the aforementioned processes, which one might also hypothesize as an intermediate space between micro- and macro-historical settings, historians can analyze identification processes with (not-yet) existing subject positions, and, for that matter, with the fictitious potential of *real* subjectivities and the real potential of *fictitious* subjectivities. What is that supposed to mean? It does not mean a differentiation between real and fictive persons, searching for unambiguous evidence of whether somebody actually lived, but, rather, how the ideas about what a person at a distinct time and place in history can be were perceived, imagined, produced, contested and dispersed. Although it is highly likely, historians cannot say with full certainty that Werther *really* lived, what we can be certain about are the enunciations of the designated, the aligned and negotiated ‘I’ within the sources. With the same focus, the following chapters will extrapolate the fantasies and the realities of this ‘I,’ which means the self-identifications we encounter in the texts of James Weldon Johnson, Elizabeth Jane Cochran, and Richard Ward Greene Welling. The stories that unfold in the texts in question here shaped knowledge about gendered, sexualized, and racialized ideas about what a person can be, as much as the depicted identity constructions deeply shaped the knowledge of personhood on the border between medico-juridical and everyday practices.

### *Figurations vs. the Author*

The self-writing practices analyzed here furthermore shaped, appropriated, produced and sometimes nullified ideas and images of others as well. By using the term figuration, I do want to avoid referring to a distinctive typology of a writer’s persona or the historical figure of the respective writer, but instead stress the relatively stable concretion of fundamentally fluid, historical contingent, and always different bodies, in which subject processes of humans are going to be visualized.<sup>55</sup> This is as a consequence directly related to the transsectional focus applied here. I have chosen these four writers in order to study each one’s practice of writing as it reveals the struggles and privileges they had in articulating their identities, but not to assess those identities. Again, what the analysis of the self-writings of the four disparate authors will uncover is how fractured identities were produced. In other words it offers a new reading of the experiences of subjectivity around 1900 in an urban metropolis, by focusing on

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<sup>54</sup> Friedrike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2005), 81. Hobsbawm – cited by Eigler – accused postmodern tendencies of blurring the lines between fact and fiction; more precisely he writes, “We cannot invent our facts. Elvis Presley is dead, or not.” Nonetheless I would argue that the conflation or the blurring is not so easy to decide. For this study one could exemplarily say, Yes Mianatomoh is dead, but within the imitation by a white social reformer, the fiction of white masculinity and the ongoing aligning subjugation of Native American identities – the ongoing murdering of the dead’s history –, become facts, as well.

<sup>55</sup> Netzwerk Körper, *What Can A Body Do? Praktiken des Körpers in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2012), 12.

the practice of writing and the authors' doubts, hardships, successes, and efforts in their self-making. To be more precise the authors *self*-making moves beyond the inquiry of an author's identity here. In James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the protagonist – the unnamed Ex-Colored Man – is not Johnson. Nonetheless Johnson conceived a black subjectivity in literature that was new and unique. Ralph Werther fluctuates in *Autobiography of an Androgyne* from one self-identification to another. Nobody knows who Werther 'really' was, even today. Although it would most likely add a lot to an already fascinating historic figure, it is not important to this study. Nellie Bly often sutured herself into her articles, and thereby altered perceptions of women in journalism. In contrast to the three writers Richard Ward Greene Welling self-fashioned as a Native American and writes about it in his diaries – with, at first glance, no further problems, struggles, or efforts for his self-identification. Nonetheless, common to all in their self-writing practice is the inquiry of their body expressions.

### *Practice Theory*

The praxeological approach has shown to be an effective tool for historians to ask questions concerned with self-making.<sup>56</sup> Theodore Schatzki denotes the “multiplicity of impulses, issues, and opposition of practice theory” in his introduction to *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, wherefore it is “not surprising that there is no unified practice approach.”<sup>57</sup> The practice or praxeological approach used here focuses on the practice of self-writing around 1900 in New York and strives to connect micro- with macro-history, because, for one, this approach is “willing to connect social historical analysis of social milieus, institutions, and social networks with the historico-cultural analysis of ways of thinking, behavior patterns and discourses.”<sup>58</sup> This study focuses on four writers and their practice of self-writing, therefore utilizing a small-scale model that is able to extrapolate the related connections between norms, values, and discursive representations on the one hand and the practices of individuals on the other hand. One further reason this approach was utilized here is that it is shaped by consciously bringing to the foreground the continuous changes between contingency and coherence of everyday practices on the one hand and the unforeseeable, contested, variable, and unfinished exemplariness on the other.<sup>59</sup> As a consequence these continuous changes evoke a hermeneutical friction, so to speak, that is able to excavate the

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<sup>56</sup> Within German scholarship most recently seen by implementing of the 2010 founded research training group GRK 1608 Self-making – Practices of subjectivation in historical and interdisciplinary perspective at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.

<sup>58</sup> Sven Reichardt, “Praxeologische Geschichtswissenschaft. Eine Diskussionsanregung,” in *Sozial. Geschichte* 22, no. 3, (2007), 44–45. [translated by BK]

<sup>59</sup> Reichardt, “Praxeologische Geschichtswissenschaft,” 44.



aforementioned ‘implicit knowledge’ Schatzki was speaking about. In other words, this implicit knowledge as analyzed and excavated here was produced within an intermediate space between individual self-writing practices and discursive representations of categories in an urban society like New York City. Thus, I argue that practices can not only be understood as the specific place of a historic social world,<sup>60</sup> which Robert Schmidt and Jörg Volbers term reconstructible ‘stages and arenas,’<sup>61</sup> but as a historical lens that might be able to consider the specific self-writing practices operating on the body. Focusing on the self-writing practice, in other words, allows one to follow the line of thought through which one anticipated and created a subject that thought itself to be self-identical with the body or that disidentified with it.<sup>62</sup>

The practice of self-writing will be analyzed with a praxeological approach, through which the efficacy and validity of this cultural and social practice can be extrapolated. Thus, the individuals are a starting point for this analysis, but they have an instrumental role in the description of a social and cultural practice.<sup>63</sup> This then again leads to the question of whether the practice of self-writing was a social and cultural practice in the first place. After all, there was no term, no group of people, nor, for that matter, a practice that was called self-writing in the late nineteenth century. Again, I understand the practice of self-writing to be self-negotiation practices of writers through which they (dis-)identified with given subject positions. In other words, self-writing as understood here calls into question various text genres such as ego-documents, diaries, or autobiographical novels that can be defined in the broadest sense as autobiographical. Philip Lejeune embraces a clear-cut understanding of the genre of autobiography. In *The Autobiographical Pact*, he understands autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life.”<sup>64</sup> This thesis is informed by literary criticism, not least because literary scholars primarily studied James Weldon Johnson’s fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, but it is less interested in delineating new genre boundaries. Autobiography as a genre is highly paradoxical; “everyone knows what autobiography is, but

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<sup>60</sup> Haasis and Rieske, *Historische Praxeologie*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Schmidt and Jörg Volbers, “Öffentlichkeit als methodologisches Prinzip. Zur Tragweite einer praxistheoretischen Grundannahme,” in *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 40, no.1 (2011): 22. Cited in *ibid.* 14.

<sup>62</sup> Netzwerk Körper, *What Can A Body Do? Praktiken des Körpers in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Campus, Frankfurt 2012), Einleitung Praktiken, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Tanner 2004. Cited in Haasis and Rieske, *Historische Praxeologie*, 50.

<sup>64</sup> Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography, A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2001), 1.

no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement.”<sup>65</sup> The word autobiography was first used at the end of the eighteenth century, “at which time three Greek elements meaning ‘self-life-writing’ were combined to describe a literature already existing under other names”<sup>66</sup> such as *memoirs* or *confessions*.

### *Transsectional focus*

This study is engaged with structures of subjugation and marginalization. Therefore, this study derives its tools (or its watchdog power) through approaches that were shaped by late 1970s and early 1980s investigations of lesbian Women of Color like the Combahee River Collective, who expressed in various ways the idea of simultaneous oppression by race, sex, and class. Kimberlé Crenshaw drew upon these ideas as expressed by the Collective when she wrote about intersectionality in the late 1980s. She used the metaphor of the intersection to denote the traffic of racism and sexism crashing into one another at an intersection, whereby it becomes indistinguishable which one of the two was the accident perpetrator.<sup>67</sup> Crenshaw described one of these societal spaces where accidents happen on a daily basis for black women in detail in *Mapping the Margins* and how these accidents mostly to the detriment of black women are handled by the law.<sup>68</sup> This concept productively criticized identity politics and at the same time posited the necessity of identity and difference categories of black women in specific, while it moreover led to a broad discussion of identity politics and difference categories in general since then. Transsectionality, as applied here, is a term that argues for an understanding of performativity, which takes into consideration the possibility of a shift of categories whenever invoked.<sup>69</sup> This invocation of categories takes place constantly and diachronically and thus in specific historical ways. It is obvious that for example homosexuality or heterosexuality were quite different concepts at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States than the ideas people have about these terms nowadays. But what do we make with all the actualizations of the categories in between? Is it for example necessary to bring to the forefront the quite different histories through the last

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<sup>65</sup> James Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980), 5.

<sup>66</sup> James Olney, “Autobiography,” 6.

<sup>67</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139-167.

<sup>68</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” in *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991): 1241-1299; Nina Mackert, “Kimberlé Crenshaw: Mapping the Margins (1991). Oder die umkämpfte Kreuzung,” in *Race & Sex. Eine Geschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. Jürgen Martschukat and Olaf Stieglitz (Berlin: Neofelis, 2016), 44-50.

<sup>69</sup> Björn Klein and Felix Krämer, “Transsektionalität,” forthcoming in *Doing Space, While Doing Gender – Vernetzungen von Raum und Geschlecht in Forschung und Politik*, eds. Aenne Gottschalk, Susanne Kersten, Felix Krämer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018).

couple of decades in which a person like Ralph Werther, who had been described as transgender, transsexual, and a gay man by scholars, was embedded? Not necessarily, but what it points out in doing so – as seen in Part I – is that it increases the awareness of the fluidity of categories in itself. So, if we understand the self-writing practice and the subjectivity processes in question as a performative act - then it might become clearer, following Jacques Derrida, that such performances are pervaded by various contradictions. Or, to put it another way, every term (every category) dominates and necessitates another axiologically. This then again shows the efficacy of categories and as a consequence how power is dispersed and propelled by denominating, ordering, and measuring. Or, as Ian Hacking posits, humans were by way of a ‘dynamical nominalism’ grouped together in the nineteenth century.<sup>70</sup> A transsectional approach as understood here as a hermeneutical tool relies therefore on intersectionality, but tries to put into focus the materiality of the body, as represented in the sources through self-writing. There are many speech acts that refer to body practices. The one this study is interested in is best described with the help of C. Riley Snorton’s reading of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography* as a transgender narrative. He posits that Johnson’s protagonist, the Ex-Colored Man, not only had a desire to be white, but also a desire to become a woman. Snorton called this desire ‘transgender yearnings.’<sup>71</sup> These yearnings are analyzable in various ways in the following four chapters, or to be more precise with a transsectional approach, as the desires to become someone else are expressed in cross-race, cross-gender, cross-class, and cross-age modes.

### *Presentation of the Chapters*

The practice of writing of the four authors was a step-by-step realization of assumed and projected identities. It was an active processing of the seemingly anomalous, for example not to consider oneself to be white or black, woman or man; and within and through this active processing, the relationship constructed between this phenomenon and a cultural set of norms can be made intelligible for scholars. As Susan Stryker points out for transgender phenomena, for example, focusing on the female impersonation of Werther cannot be done “without ever losing sight of the fact that ‘difference’ and ‘hierarchy’ are never mere abstractions; they are systems of power that operate on actual bodies, capable of producing pain and pleasure, health and sickness, punishment and reward, life and death.”<sup>72</sup> By focusing on Werther’s everyday practices, Part 1 intends to avoid “allowing gender normativity to disappear into the

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<sup>70</sup> Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” in *Reconstructing Individualism*, eds. T.L. Heller, M. Sosna, D.E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

<sup>71</sup> C. Riley Snorton, “Passing for White, Passing for Man, Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as Transgender Narrative,” in: *Transgender Migrations, The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*, ed. Trystan T. Cotten (New York: Routledge, 2012), 107-118.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

unanalyzed, ambient background.”<sup>73</sup> By not focusing on an act perceived as the exotic, a phenomenon, or in other words an aberration from contemporary normative gender representation, like female impersonation, cross-dressing and homosexuality in turn-of-the-century New York City, but instead taking into account and focusing on a not-so-exotic practice like writing, I want to avoid the pitfalls of the disappearance of the power relations at work. In contrast, Part 2 is intended to show that focusing on Nellie Bly as a so-called woman journalist in the late 1880s, namely by emphasizing her as one of the first investigative women in journalism, as has been done since, authorizes and reproduces the binary model of gender. Beginning with her practice of writing represents an attempt to shift away from an all-encompassing focus on this gender binary, with its historical narrative of doing something for the first time (as a woman), and instead to highlight how she worked with representations of gender ideals. Highlighting, as a historian, the narrative of doing something for the first time, can reproduce gender binaries, and other categories of difference as well. With Johnson's fictional *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, written between 1905 and 1911, the social realities of racialized identity categories were put into question (Part 3). Johnson's *Autobiography* was a form of self-writing on a different level than the others in this study. He used the genre of the autobiography in a unique way to write about the possibilities and impossibilities of self-making of African American people. He scrutinized with literary tools what W. E. B. Du Bois once termed ‘double consciousness.’ Unlike the previous chapters, Part 4 focuses on a different form of self-writing altogether. Whereas one could perceive the three previous authors as minority subjects, Richard Ward Greene Welling was a white Anglo-Saxon social reformer and a political ally of Theodore Roosevelt. For him, there was no categorization necessary, because he embodied the category that was not called into question: that of a white, heterosexual, protestant, and Anglo-Saxon man. Although all four authors may be considered educated, and to various degrees privileged, Welling's practice of self-writing in focus here was unlike any of the others. What comes into view in this chapter is his diary writing. To be more precise, I will focus on his note-taking on his ethnic drag preparations. He impersonated Miantonomoh of the Narragansett people for the Bradley Martin Ball in New York in 1897, an event which some historical accounts picked out as one of the turning points that heralded the start of the Progressive Era in the United States. His diary-entries call into question the fictionality of categorizations and Native American appropriations alike, while extrapolating the systems of power that produced and sustained categories of race.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## Part I

### Self-writing in medical journals

#### 1. Introduction

Then it was a matter of sometimes having to cudgel my brain to get a book out of it. But my writing that first book a score of years ago seems to have made the composition of books second nature. My brain gives them birth without conscious effort or volition. But this involuntary cerebration exhausts my brain. After four or five hours at high pressure, I can do no more that day because of brain fag. Practically always I first scribble down what comes as if by inspiration. Then I revise before the first typing. I have tried original composition on the typewriter, but find it less economical of time and brain power.<sup>74</sup>

This quote from Ralph Werther's manuscript of an unpublished book titled *Riddle of the Underworld* already bears some of the key elements of what this chapter is focused on. What one may perceive as a hyperbolic description of oneself, the act of composing a book as "second nature," for instance, but also the remark how he "practically always" scribbled down "what comes as if by inspiration," followed by the notion of revising one's own work, as well as the depiction of the techniques used to compose – all of these notions are related to the practice of writing. But this short manuscript excerpt also already shows a unique combination of self-fashioning through the very act of writing. The above quote also indicates what this study only touches upon very briefly. It refers to a writing technique called automatic writing, which became a tool in Freudian psychoanalysis and in related self-knowledge studies in the 1920s in the United States.<sup>75</sup> The key texts of this study, in contrast, were written between 1887 and 1911, when Oedipus was not yet king of medical discourse. Ralph Werther was born in 1874, most likely in the Connecticut Panhandle, as historians assume from his<sup>76</sup> first published book *Autobiography of an Androgyne* in 1919.<sup>77</sup> He was the

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<sup>74</sup> Ralph Werther, *The Riddle of the Underworld*, Victor Robinson Papers 1898–1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28.

<sup>75</sup> Anita M. Mühl, "Automatic writing as an indicator of the fundamental factors underlying the personality" in *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology*, 17, no. 2 (Jul–Sep 1922): 162–183.

<sup>76</sup> As Joanne Meyerowitz and others have pointed out, Ralph Werther lived his life primarily as a man, and used 'Ralph Werther' and 'Earl Lind' as his authorial personae, therefore using the masculine pronoun. This was confirmed by my research.

<sup>77</sup> Ralph Werther, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2008 [1918]), 35: In *Autobiography*, Werther mentions that he was born 50 miles from New York City. In his second book: Ralph Werther – Jennie June, *The Female Impersonators* (New York: Medico-Legal Journal, 1922), 97, he writes that he spent his youth in the Connecticut hills, and in: Ralph Werther – Jennie June, "The Girl-Boy's Suicide," *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology* XIV (1918): 495, he mentions his household having been in a New England mill town. In Ralph Werther's unpublished manuscript *Riddle of the Underworld*, to be found in the Victor Robinson Papers 1898–1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28, he writes that he often visited New York City in his teens and that it was only one hour away by express train. In another article by Werther, he mentions that his family was located in the outskirts of a large New England mill town. See: Ralph Werther, Jennie June, "The Fairie-Boy,"

only person yet known who, as a female impersonator and self-described ultra-androgyne, middle-class invert and working-class fairie, wrote about his life and the lives of other androgynes in New York City around 1900. Werther's writings are filled with descriptions of non-normative genders, sexualities and spaces. The writings were also informed by a unique and distinct kind of street knowledge intertwined with scientific expertise, paired with constant religious undertones of self-criticism. When Werther was not writing, he walked through New York once a week mostly roaming around immigrant and working-class neighborhoods like Little Italy, the Bowery and Hell's Kitchen. He did so as a female impersonator called Jennie June, while he also worked every weekday for seven hours at a medical journal, using one of his other pseudonyms, Earl Lind. Upon his relocation to New York City in 1891, he almost immediately began to write, among other things about his many interactions with physicians, widening the spectrum of knowledge that ran through his diaries up to this point. In his second published book, *The Female Impersonators*, released in 1922, he stated that in his middle twenties he "passed as three separate personalities within the same week," finishing the sentence with an ironic remark: "they had – poor things – to share the identic body alternately."<sup>78</sup> Writing was at the core of his everyday life in New York City. I argue that writing was the practice in which his various self-identifications were contained and partly realized. In this chapter I will analyze Werther's practice of writing with an approach that is able to extrapolate the implicit knowledge of the everyday practices and thereby and in contrast with previous research on Werther, I want to evaluate his self-writing practice as a means to gain a closer look on self-identification processes in late nineteenth-century New York City.

In late nineteenth-century medical discourse, a distinct individualism was shaped: People were made up, structured, and assigned into new categories of being.<sup>79</sup> In fact, this time period and its inventions of new identity categories brought to being categories that are still relevant, even if their meanings changed and/or are still fiercely contested, as in the cases of 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality.' These categories (re-)structured modes of thought, and structured and disseminated power. In contrast to other approaches, I decided to give up

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*The American Journal of Urology and Sexology* XIV (1918): 433. If these statements are accurate, Werther must have lived in the so-called Connecticut panhandle. According to Wikipedia entries, the two largest mill towns in the Connecticut panhandle were Bridgeport and New London: "Mill town," last modified May 2, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mill\\_town#New\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mill_town#New_England). This might prove helpful in discovering his real birth name.

<sup>78</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> This does not mean that invented categories such as 'homosexuality' were modes of relating to oneself. However, as medical thought gained more influence on people's everyday lives, it nonetheless shaped everyday assumptions of groups and people as well. See, therefore, the discussions of the patients of the Women's Lunatic Asylum in Part 2.

categories such as ‘homosexual,’ ‘transsexual,’ or ‘transgender’ in order to more fully stress the historic specificity of Werther’s self-writing practice. Calling upon these categories is as telling of the time period in which the research was done, as it does describe historical processes, as will become evident in the next chapter. Scholarly research on Werther thus far often focused on gender- and sexuality-related approaches like the analysis of homosexual cruising or of transsexual body modifications, as we will see in the following chapter. Starting with the practice of writing as a focus of interest thus not only invokes other categories of difference (especially class) but also helps to show how categories of difference were produced in the first place.

Ralph Werther, Earl Lind, Jennie June, Raphael Werther, and Pussie were the five aliases that Werther used out of necessity. As he began a ‘double life,’ he told “the Underworld my legal name was Raphael Werther [...] after the Prince of Painters.”<sup>80</sup> The second part of his name has been chosen from “the Prince of Amatory Melancholiacs,” (sic) the protagonist in Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s first novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. At the same time, he worked for a journal of the Medico-Legal Society – an institution established in the second half of the nineteenth century with its headquarters in New York City. Only later in life did Werther become an advocate for the rights of androgynous people. He was a part-time female impersonator, a writer, a teacher, and a legal clerk. He attained access to the medical profession in New York City, acquiring knowledge about contemporary theories of sexology – the scientific study of human sexuality that had its advent around the same time that he moved to New York City in the 1890s. As a writer, he invented a male sex-scale containing six different types of men, ranging from “tremendously virile men” to “full human hermaphrodites.”<sup>81</sup> He was informed and propelled by sexological studies as much as he was a devout protestant of Methodist denomination while at the same time strolling through streets and little-known theatres as a female impersonator once a week for twelve years. Cross-dressing, gender impersonation, and long term masquerades of the opposite sex have a long history in the United States.<sup>82</sup> At Werther’s time, female impersonation was closely connected to the theatrical performances of gender impersonation in minstrel shows and the burgeoning vaudeville scene of New York City.

All of this was accompanied by keeping a diary “almost without intermission”<sup>83</sup> that unfortunately only exists in citations in his first book *Autobiography*. Werther shaped the

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<sup>80</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 93.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–24.

<sup>82</sup> Bonnie Bullough and Vern L. Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

<sup>83</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 17.

medico-legal discourse of non-normative genders and sexualities in the United States well into the mid-twentieth century.<sup>84</sup> In the books and articles published in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Werther introduces the readers to friendly androgynes and female impersonators in New York City, as well as to many figures of mythology and history presented as androgynes.<sup>85</sup> Contemporary readers found themselves entangled in a web of thick historical references ranging from the garden of Gethsemane, to English drama, nineteenth-century French and American poetry, to proto-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* references. While Werther wanted to write for a broad and general readership, his reach was restricted with recourse to the federal Comstock Law of 1873. The law was named after one of the “most notorious moral reformers in U.S. history,” Anthony Comstock (1844–1915), who “appointed himself as an urban moral guardian” in New York City.<sup>86</sup> As early as 1868, he helped to pass a law that forbade explicit sexual literature, so-called obscene literature to be circulated via post offices in the United States, which soon became the *Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use*, commonly known as the Comstock Law/Act. This was one of the reasons why Werther could not publish his books for a broader public.

In the preface to his *Autobiography* Werther remarks that he submitted the first draft of the first book to Comstock in 1900, in order to check if it was eligible for release. It was not; and it wasn’t until eighteen years later when it was released in the *Medico-Legal Journal*, therefore restricting his readership to sociologists, physicians, lawyers, psychologists, and legislators.<sup>87</sup> While the books do contain a lot of frank and explicit sexual descriptions, both books — *Autobiography* as well as *The Female Impersonators* — are also an interrogation into the ways in which normative gendered and sexual identities were shaped in one of the biggest and busiest turn-of-the-century metropolises of the western world. Werther did not

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<sup>84</sup> In 1931, Werther’s editor and employer Alfred W. Herzog published his seminal work *Medical Jurisprudence*. Over 1,000-pages thick, it was considered to “draw attention of the lawyer to subjects he should thoroughly study in his medico-legal case” by offering medical knowledge to “conduct his examination of witnesses.” The physician is meant “to be informed as to his duties as a witness and to the knowledge he must possess and the care he must exercise in his employment.” The book contained numerous paragraphs that utilized Werther’s knowledge laid out in his books and articles. Alfred W. Herzog, *Medical Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis: Bobby-Merril Company 1931).

<sup>85</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*. One chapter in *The Female Impersonators* covers “Androgynes of Mythology and History” – several illustrations depict androgynes of the past, including an ancient Greek statue called Hermaphroditos, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Raphael.

<sup>86</sup> Comstock was the chief proponent of the “Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” which came to be known as the Comstock Law/Act. It banned obscenity sent through the postal system, including information about abortion and birth control. See: Claudette L. Tolson, “Comstock, Anthony,” in *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, ed. Melissa Hope Ditmore (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 116.

<sup>87</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, Preface.



portray an ideal man or woman, but by extrapolating and exemplifying how the “sexually abnormal by birth”<sup>88</sup> lived – a term Werther borrowed from medical discourse and used deliberately for himself and other androgynes, as he used the term fairie, urning and various others over time – he also gave an account of the ways in which normative sexualities were produced. “Fairie,” Werther’s spelling of ‘fairy’ was, unlike ‘androgyne’ and ‘urning,’ not a term that derived from, or was common in medical or legal discourse. It was a term used colloquially, both derogatory and affirmatively, in New York by and for effeminate men. For the select professional readers, Werther’s *Autobiography* was also a tour de force<sup>89</sup> through New York’s immigrants and working-class quarters, the backrooms of hotels, dark streets and parks that most readers will have been entirely unfamiliar with, as holds true for Werther’s depictions of “slum resorts,” the “slum life,” and the so called ‘underworld’ in general, which depicts the contemporary and fashionable practice of slumming.<sup>90</sup> This indicates the importance of historically specifying contemporary epistemologies in turn-of-the-century New York City.

## 2. Searching for Ralph Werther (Research Status)

The research done on Werther tells us a lot about the debate around gendered identities in social movements and in academia throughout the last six decades. Starting with the invocation of Werther as a transsexual “man” (sic) in the 1960s to his recent inclusion into transgender history, this short research status overview will briefly sketch the manifold actualizations of a self-described androgyne of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Homosexual activists like Jonathan Ned Katz did the first detailed research on Werther in the 1970s. Without Katz, historians like Meyerowitz and transgender activists and academics like Stryker would not have had the chance to think about Werther in the first place. Having said that, there has been significant research on Werther in the past decades. But still: In light of his unique writings style, his abundance of references to an underground New York City scene, and the various practices ranging from late nineteenth-century cruising to gender impersonation, research on Werther is still under-represented. At the same time, research on

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<sup>88</sup> Ralph Werther, *The Riddle of the Underworld*, in: Victor Robinson Papers 1898–1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28.

<sup>89</sup> An unknown reviewer of *Autobiography* wrote: “It is not pleasant reading,” in: *American Journal of Surgery*, Vol. XXXIV, No.4, April 1920: 116; another reviewer of *Autobiography* termed Werther a “pervert of unusual type” who showed “periods of Sadistic and Masochistic expression.” Dyer, “Review of *Autobiography*” *The New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, June (1919): 527.

<sup>90</sup> Slumming was a practice of mostly middle-class white Americans going into quarters of their city, colloquially depicted as slums, to gaze at people that were construed as the ethnic, sexual, classist and gender other. Heap wrote about the practice of slumming and how it solidified emerging racial and sexual systems of the twentieth century, see: Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009).

Werther is also still a search for Werther: Since the 1970s, scholars have been trying to find out who Werther was in the first place. We still do not know his birth-name and although it would have to have been a decades-long and elaborate fictionalization, it is still unclear if Werther was real in the first place. These are, however, not the questions of this chapter. Analyzing the practice of self-writing does not necessarily need to refer to a real person. My focus thus is not the historical figure Werther, but how a practice of self-writing produced other ways of being and relating to a world that was more and more structured in binaries.

### **2.1. Minds that have been brought back - mentally ill and handicapped (Voids/60s)**

Between the last known review of *Autobiography* in a British medical journal in 1924<sup>91</sup> and the first mention of Werther again in 1961 in a book called *Minds That Came Back* stands a long void.<sup>92</sup> Although Werther helped to shape the profession of sexology in the 1910s and 1920s in New York City, he was soon lost to history. He enjoyed a brief stint as a medical writer and published two books between 1919 and 1922, *Autobiography* and *The Female Impersonators*. In this brief timeframe, Werther also published eight more articles. But as suddenly as he appeared in the medical world, he vanished again. Except for listed entries in the *Cumulative Book Index* of the *United States Catalog*, the *National Union Catalog*, the *Library of Congress Catalog* and in an early bibliography called *The Homosexual in Literature* nothing in regard to Werther could be found for the next thirty-six years.<sup>93</sup> No further articles, no obituary, no estates, no papers, no further reviews. When Werther was again mentioned briefly in 1961, he was identified as transsexual and nymphomaniac.<sup>94</sup> Werther reappeared as a figure of medical interest in *Minds That Came Back*, a book by a Professor of Medicine at the University of Minnesota, Walter C. Alvarez, who compiled autobiographies of “mentally upset, highly eccentric, alcoholic, or otherwise ill or handicapped” people.<sup>95</sup> Alvarez endorsed sex-change surgery and brought back Werther’s books that seemed to have been lost or forgotten in the meantime. In a brief description, Werther’s *Autobiography* was deemed “the world’s strangest autobiography of a ‘man’ with large breasts who behaved with other men like a nymphomaniac.”<sup>96</sup> The notion of Werther as

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<sup>91</sup> M. Hamblin Smith, “Review of *Androgyne*” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 70 (1924): 138.

<sup>92</sup> Walter C. Alvarez, *Minds That Came Back* (Philadelphia J.B. Lippincott, 1961) 5.

<sup>93</sup> Noel I. Garde, *The Homosexual in Literature; a Chronological Bibliography, circa 700 B.C. – 1958* (New York: Village Press, 1959); Mary Burnham, *The United States Catalog, Supplement, Cumulative Book Index* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1928); Library of Congress, *National Union Catalog; a Cumulative Author List Representing Library of Congress Printed Cards and Titles Reported by Other American Libraries* (Washington: 1956).

<sup>94</sup> Walter C. Alvarez, *Minds That Came Back* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1961) 361.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 361/2.

a transsexual person was new. But the disparaging terminology was quite akin to the reviews of Werther's book in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Physicians like Perry M. Lichtenstein for example had already termed Werther "a freak of nature,"<sup>97</sup> others considered him "not sane" or "a pervert of unusual type."<sup>98</sup> It is unclear why Alvarez used the term 'transsexual' to describe Werther. As Werther was one of the first known persons who underwent castration in New York City in 1902, Alvarez most likely perceived Werther's castration as the desire for a sex-reassignment surgery. Surgeries of this type were, however, not yet available at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the United States. One of the first identifiable and successful sex changes was arranged through Magnus Hirschfeld's institute in Berlin, Germany.<sup>99</sup> But in the 1960s there was an emergence of sex reassignment surgeries in the United States, especially with the work of sexologist and endocrinologist Harry Benjamin. Alvarez in his depiction of Werther might thus have been influenced by the emergence of sex reassignment surgeries, and the aligned sensationalist media coverage of transsex people in the United States.<sup>100</sup>

## **2.2. Republication of *Autobiography of an Androgyne* in 1975 (70s/80s/90s Research)**

The brief interlude of Werther's reappearance as a transsex person changed in the 1970s due to the efforts led by author, playwright, gay rights activist, teacher, textile designer, and chronicler and historian of the gay, lesbian, and African American experience in the United States, Jonathan Ned Katz.<sup>101</sup> Katz was asked by Arnold Zone, the editor of Arno Press to head a committee choosing a series of reprints on homosexuality. Zone knew that Katz was

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<sup>97</sup> Perry M. Lichtenstein, "The Fairy and the Lady Lover," *Medical Review of Reviews*, August (1921): 369.

<sup>98</sup> Dyer, "Review of *Autobiography of an Androgyne*," *The New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, June 1919: 527.

<sup>99</sup> Dorchen Richter underwent castration in 1922 and in 1931 had his penis removed and a vagina surgically constructed; see: Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexualism in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 19.

<sup>100</sup> Especially the sex change of Christine Jorgensen, a former GI soldier, was covered extensively in the 1950s. See: Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; Joanne Meyerowitz, "A Fierce and Demanding Drive," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006); See also: Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008); Susan Stryker, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000); Eliza Steinbock, "My response to Screening/Lecture of *Christine in the Cutting Room* (given by Susan Stryker), Utrecht 2013; Jürgen Martschukat, Olaf Stieglitz, *Geschichte der Männlichkeiten* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008), 156.

<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz supported the work on this chapter greatly by discussing his research on Werther since the 1970s with me. He encouraged my efforts greatly, welcomed me at my archival stay in New York City in 2014 and pointed me to his papers at the New York Public Library, which cover 140 boxes of LGBTQ history. See: Jonathan Ned Katz Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, 1947–2004, MssCol 1621.

working on a collection of primary documents,<sup>102</sup> a source book “that would shape generations of scholars.”<sup>103</sup> Katz recovered Werther’s *Autobiography* from obscurity and republished *Autobiography of an Androgyne* in 1975.<sup>104</sup> A year later, Katz published the eminent collection of gay and lesbian primary sources *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* It again featured sources by Werther<sup>105</sup> and rediscovered him – fifty-four years after the publication of *The Female Impersonators* – as a proponent for the rights of homosexuals in the United States. The sourcebook *Gay American History* covered, amongst a wealth of other information on homosexual history, a few of Werther’s forgotten places in New York, like a club for male cross-dressers, the *Cercle Hermaphrodites*. The *Cercle* was “a little club” for men who “like to doll themselves up in feminine finery,” having been formed to “unite for defense against the world’s bitter persecution of bisexuals.”<sup>106</sup> Werther interviewed members of this club in 1896 and featured it in *The Female Impersonators*. The club was located at Paresis Hall, officially named Columbia Hall, which was mentioned in a vice report in 1899 as well.<sup>107</sup> Other than Werther’s reference to it in *The Female Impersonators*, no source attesting to the club’s existence could be located.

A handful of historians have tried to uncover Werther’s identity in the last couple of decades. Eminently, Katz tried (and tries) to identify Werther’s birth name. Katz shared a three decades long discussion with Joel Honig<sup>108</sup> about Werther and other places and persons of interest for gay and lesbian history. Today, as extensive gay and lesbian documentation has

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<sup>102</sup> Email interview conducted with Jonathan Ned Katz, Feb. 8th, 2016. The one, which would become *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.: A Documentary*, released in 1976.

<sup>103</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, George E. Haggerty, “Introduction,” in *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) X.

<sup>104</sup> It was not Alvarez’s book that made Katz aware of Werther’s *Autobiography*. Some earlier bibliography alerted Katz to the existence of the two books by Werther. He thinks it may have been the *U.S. Surgeon General’s Catalogue*, a major source of his, or some of the early bibliographies on homosexuality, such as William Parker’s *Homosexuality: A Selective Bibliography* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1971), which contained over 3,000 items. There are two other bibliographies Katz mentions, Martin S. Weinberg, *Homosexuality: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) and Ian Young, *The Male Homosexual in Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1975). Ralph Werther, *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.: A Documentary* (New York: Crowell, 1976).

<sup>106</sup> Ralph Werther, *The Female Impersonators* (New York: Medico-Legal Journal, 1922): 151.

<sup>107</sup> Report of the Special Committee of the Assembly Appointed to Investigate the Public Offices and Departments of the City of New York and the Counties therein included, Vol. 1, Albany 1900: 174.

<sup>108</sup> American music critic, copy editor, writer, and pianist who later became Katz’s editor. The discussion started in February 1977, when Katz received a letter from Honig, complimenting him on the recent publication of *Gay American History*. Honig not only applauded him on his “fascinating and beautiful done book” but offered additional information on the history of gay clubs, books, and persons in New York City. They shared information on where to look in New York City archives, what registrars to call on, which names to look up, and wandered the streets to find former locations of gay bars. Werther was frequently mentioned in their correspondence.

moved into the Internet, a network of scholars has come together to search for Werther's real name in a group effort.<sup>109</sup> When Katz started thinking about Werther, he perceived him and his texts in relation to the early advent of an organized homosexual emancipation movement in the United States. George Chauncey's seminal *Gay New York - Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World*,<sup>110</sup> published in 1994, also featured Werther and his life in the Bowery in the 1890s. Chauncey discusses how stereotypical signs, such as wearing red ties, white gloves, and certain other behaviors perceived as effeminate, were used for the identification of homosexuals as well as for their self-identification, sometimes with the same markers.<sup>111</sup> Werther is a reoccurring figure in Chauncey's *Making of the Gay Male World* narrative. Chauncey stresses Werther's self-identification as a fairie, and emphasizes the importance of social spaces like the *Cercle Hermaphrodites* or masquerade balls in New York's so-called underworld in contrast to the burgeoning medical discourse on homosexuality.<sup>112</sup> From the 1970s to the 1990s, historians therefore mainly discussed Werther's accounts in relation to the history of homosexuality. This changed with the emergence of new gender theories from the 1990s onwards to a certain extent.<sup>113</sup>

### 2.3. Thinking sex while strolling through the past (Research Status/since 2000)

Within the context of the rise of Transgender Studies in the United States since the 1990s, Joanne Meyerowitz introduces Werther as a gender variant person in her twentieth-century history of transsexuality in the United States, *How Sex Changed*, in 2002.<sup>114</sup> Susan Stryker also presents Werther as an early advocate for gender variant persons.<sup>115</sup> Almost ten years after her first inclusion of Werther in the history of transsex people, Meyerowitz wrote another article about Werther for the *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*,<sup>116</sup> this time putting Werther into dialogue with another groundbreaking text that "reshaped how I (and others) approached sexuality and gender," Gayle Rubin's essay, *Thinking Sex*.<sup>117</sup> Meyerowitz's insightful

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<sup>109</sup> Werther/June Research, accessed June 6, 2017, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/katz-writing-work/wertherresearch>

<sup>110</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York, Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of a Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>111</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> George Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization Of Female Deviance," in *Salmagundi*, 58/59, (Fall 1982–Winter 1983).

<sup>113</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 55.

<sup>114</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 17.

<sup>115</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 41.

<sup>116</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Thinking Sex with an Androgyne," in *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, 17 (2011): 97.

<sup>117</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston 1984), quoted in: Meyerowitz, *Thinking Sex*, 101.

*Thinking Sex with an Androgyne* presents Werther's *Autobiography* as an invitation to "think sex, think gender, and complicate the categories of analysis we often take for granted today."<sup>118</sup> In context with Werther's late-1910s *Autobiography* she reminds us of how the "two distinct arenas of social practice"<sup>119</sup> nonetheless converged and how difficult it was "of drawing the boundaries between the two."<sup>120</sup>

Aaron Shaheen takes up Meyerowitz's thread and analyzes how Werther's identity "was based on a paradox." Shaheen discusses Werther's female impersonation sprees as *flânerie*, as it "is as much a perpetual interior wandering between the states of becoming and being as it is an idle wandering in space and time."<sup>121</sup> Shaheen extrapolates guidelines for a deeper understanding of modern discussions of sexuality, which he argues are based in Victorian-era formulations of womanhood. Therefore, he uses the term *flânerie*, because unlike "the teleological activities"<sup>122</sup> cruising (sexual gratification) and slumming (gaining knowledge), *flânerie* was an idle wandering, "placed in conversation alongside prevailing discourses of Victorian womanhood," and "revealed itself as an ontology based on a tautology."<sup>123</sup> There are many merits to Shaheen's approach. In Walter Benjamin's words, the *flâneur* was a figure in the middle, residing "between the worlds of money and magic," therefore simultaneously being "a figure on the threshold."<sup>124</sup> Werther's usage of the term 'fairie' also evokes a kind of magic, in the sense that the fairie, as Werther puts it, never grew out of babyhood, which is central to his effeminacy, as Shaheen points out. The fairie resides in an underworld, a term only vaguely defined, highly contested, and as Thomas Heise posits therefore of "geographic and discursive forces"<sup>125</sup> that helps to "tell the story of poverty and waste, of race and riots, of deviant sexuality and myriad criminalities."<sup>126</sup> Victorian womanhood, in contrast, was a womanly ideal "informed by Victorian constructions of purity, piety, and perpetual adolescence,"<sup>127</sup> which Werther combined with the assumption of women as being childish, performing "a reversion to childhood." Shaheen focuses on Werther's "nocturnal rambles"<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Meyerowitz, *Thinking Sex*, 98. In *Thinking Sex*, Rubin argued for heuristically separating gender and sexuality in research, paving the way for Queer Studies in the United States.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Aaron Shaheen, "Strolling through the Slums of the Past: Ralph Werther's Love Affair with Victorian Womanhood in *Autobiography of an Androgyne*," in *PMLA* 128.4 (2013).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 925.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, trans. *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) XII.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Heise, "Degenerate Sex and the City: Djuna Barnes's Urban Underworld," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 55 (2009): 288.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Heise, "Degenerate Sex and the City," 288.

<sup>127</sup> Shaheen, "Strolling through the Slums," 925.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 930.

exemplifying how he embraces his “ultimate calling: the nurturing Victorian materfamilias.”<sup>129</sup> Shaheen shows how this assumed calling was connected at the crossroads of race, class, and nation. In addition to Shaheen’s “Victorian materfamilias” (sic) assumption of Werther, I argue that Werther’s practice of self-writing was central to his self-making. He writes in his diaries, attempts to get published for eighteen years, fights with his editor for every word in his manuscripts, and finally becomes the author he wanted to be as he publishes in the *Medico-Legal Journal* his articles and books under the male authorial persona. The approach used in this chapter will therefore ask how Werther’s Victorian ideal of womanhood was also informed by other archetypes circulating around 1900 New York City, such as the self-made man. Was the female impersonator Werther a self-made man<sup>130</sup> as much as a Victorian materfamilias, if we focus on the practice of Werther’s writing?

Scott Herring, a literary scholar, is the editor of the critical edition of *Autobiography*. He considers *Autobiography* a centerpiece for queer, trans, and gender studies of twentieth-century America. He was the second scholar to republish *Autobiography*. Herring was astonished that, “given the content and form the memoir exhibits many now-classic modernist tropes – self-alienation, social alienation, cosmopolitan contact, unreliable narration, and fractured narrative – that have come to define the accomplishments of Werther’s more recognized peers,” it was still marginalized by literary critics, American studies scholars, and historians of United States sexuality.<sup>131</sup> In his rich and detailed critical introduction, Herring nonetheless focuses on the notion of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Following Meyerowitz’s reminder that “the past can show us that our own ways of seeing the world are contingent, curious, and changeable,”<sup>132</sup> the next chapter will try to “listen to [Werther] and the people around him in early twentieth century New York.”<sup>133</sup> Listening carefully to a historical persona is a complex task. Listening to a couple of gender variant and sexual non-conforming self-identifications or, as Werther put it, “three separate personalities that had to share the identic body,” does not make the historical analysis any easier. Meyerowitz further asks why Werther seemed to see “age as performative as some of us see gender,” bringing her to the unanswered question: “What should we make of this, of the age

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<sup>129</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 931.

<sup>130</sup> The concept of the ‘self-made man’ – the idea that a man can achieve success and fulfill the expectations of manhood through his own merit and hard work – has been central to American constructions of masculinity since the early nineteenth century. Rodney Hessinger, “Self-Made Man,” in *American Masculinities, A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003).

<sup>131</sup> Scott Herring, introduction to *Androgyne*, by Ralph Werther, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008) X.

<sup>132</sup> Meyerowitz, *Thinking Sex*, 103.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

crossing that was just as transgressive in its way as the gender crossing?”<sup>134</sup> Focusing on the self-writing, the analysis gets even more complicated. Categories of difference such as religion and class come to the foreground, bringing to the forefront contemporary changes of self-identification – and realization, as we will see in the main chapter.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 103.



### 3. Self-writing as an androgyne

Werther used different terms for self-identifications in his books and articles. These self-identifications were subject to change and came from different fields of knowledge: Urning<sup>135</sup>, (passive) invert<sup>136</sup>, fairie,<sup>137</sup> and androgyne,<sup>138</sup> the latter being the word that “has come into use to denote an individual with male genitals, but whose physical structure otherwise, whose psychical constitution, and *vita sexualis* [sexual life] approach the female type”<sup>139</sup> as he writes in *Autobiography*. All three terms indicate a vast knowledge of medical science – ranging from mid-nineteenth-century German sexological theories to a language that was used in everyday speech in New York City. In his second book *The Female Impersonators* he formulates a theory of a male-sex scale in which he specifies himself as an ultra-androgyne.<sup>140</sup> Werther’s editor, Alfred W. Herzog, instead uses the term ‘homosexualist’ to describe Werther in his introduction to *Autobiography*.<sup>141</sup> Herzog, a physician and surgeon, as well as a counselor at law, did not intend to publish *Autobiography* “in defense of all those who indulge in homosexual practices” but as an “endeavor to obtain justice and humane treatment for the Androgynes, that class of homosexualists in whom homosexuality is not an acquired vice but in whom it is congenital.”<sup>142</sup> The historical conception of bisexuality that Herzog also – and interchangeably – uses is what nowadays is understood as homosexuality. He understands this kind of homosexualism and bisexuality as a distinct congenital inversion. This refers to the popular turn-of-the-century notion of homosexuals as women trapped in a man’s body and the other way around.<sup>143</sup> Between all of these contemporary sexualized and gendered notions of identity, one of the most overlooked self-identifications in all of Werther’s books and articles is the perpetual reference to himself as a writer.

Werther wrote from an early age. In *The Female Impersonators*, the reader learns that Werther wrote stories since he was eight years old, and that “at thirteen [he] was confident [he] would become an author and [his] name be chiselled (sic) on the walls of fame.”<sup>144</sup> He had two main objectives in writing: First came introspection, later in life followed by a missionary stance. In the preface of *Autobiography*, Werther mentions being “unusually

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<sup>135</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 20/93.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 20/1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 19/20.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>140</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators* (New York: Medico-Legal Journal, 1922).

<sup>141</sup> Alfred W. Herzog, introduction to *Autobiography*, by Ralph Werther (New York: *Medico-Legal Journal*, 1918) 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15.

<sup>142</sup> Alfred W. Herzog, introduction to *Autobiography*, by Ralph Werther, 8.

<sup>143</sup> The first sexologist who popularized this idea was Karl-Heinz Ulrichs. He termed these persons uranians (Urnings). See Volkmar Sigusch, *Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008), 148.

<sup>144</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 83.

introspective,”<sup>145</sup> leading him to “begin a diary at the age of fourteen.”<sup>146</sup> It “continued [...] up to past the age of forty almost without intermission,” wherein “even my earliest diaries dealt with the phenomena of my sexual life.”<sup>147</sup> The first paragraph sets the tone for the following pages, Werther’s “phenomena of sexual life.” But it also highlights the practice of continuous writing from an early age on. Furthermore, Werther portrays the process of writing as being aligned with introspection, having to keep his diaries “under lock and key.”<sup>148</sup> The reason for this secrecy is disclosed in the next paragraph, where the reader learns that Werther “sought a cure for my sexual abnormality,” and that an unknown New Yorker physician he visited in 1892 said “that my case was a remarkable one.”<sup>149</sup> The unknown physician’s words had an impact on Werther because “[t]his pronouncement incited me still further to keep a record of what life brought me with a view to writing an autobiography some day.”<sup>150</sup> Seven years later, in 1899, he made good on his promise and finished the first draft of this imagined autobiography he had dreamt about a couple of years earlier. From Herzog’s introduction in *Autobiography* we also know what ‘abnormality’ medical professionals began talking about at the time: homosexuality.<sup>151</sup> Herzog also makes clear why he is publishing the book: “The reason for its appearance is missionary.”<sup>152</sup> Werther’s life account is therefore also intended to present to the reader that the androgynes’ practices are merely “harmless instinctive sexual conduct” and that it is “unjust to keep on the statue books these laws against an unfortunate and harmless class.” Here, Herzog is referring to a penalty “from five to twenty years imprisonment” for homosexual conduct.<sup>153</sup> According to his editor, writing for Werther was in this sense not only introspection and missionary self-assignment, but also a battle, as he “fought with all his might against any of his verses being omitted. Every single word that [he] wanted to change or expunge was of vital importance to him.”<sup>154</sup> Which is why at least *Autobiography* practically remained in its original form, because according to Herzog it “would serve its mission best unedited,” with Werther having “written into it his own soul, for

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<sup>145</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 17.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Fearing the consequences he most likely had to endure when somebody got to know his sexual desires.

Werther, *Autobiography*, 17.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Alfred W. Herzog, introduction to *Autobiography*, by Ralph Werther, 8.

<sup>152</sup> Herzog, introduction, 8.

<sup>153</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 18. The criminal code was changed in New York in 1881 and raised to 5–20 years for sodomy. A revision in 1881 removed the minimum sentence of five years, but expanded the reach of the law to include one who “carnally knows any male or female person in any matter contrary to nature; or voluntarily submits to such carnal knowledge. George Painter, “Sodomy Laws, The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers, The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States,” accessed May 13, 2015, [http://glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/new\\_york.htm](http://glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/new_york.htm).

<sup>154</sup> Herzog, introduction, 15.

him to read who can see further than the printed word.”<sup>155</sup> Although Werther wrote about sexual conduct between men quite openly, his works were more than a spotlight into New York City’s gay life around 1900. As mentioned before, Werther’s self-identifications changed within his writings. To focus on homosexuality would neglect not only the gendered identity changes in the writings, but also, to a certain degree, the classified and racialized framings of his self-identifications and the aligning (dis-)identifications. These (dis-)identifications are consequently sutured within and by his self-writing practice.

Werther’s books and articles are influenced by – and make use of – an abundance of writing styles that shaped his self-identity and what others would think of both him and other androgynes. All of his texts include all of the markers that Thomas Etzemüller has termed biography generators: Confession, psychoanalysis, diary, memoirs, and medical history.<sup>156</sup> Etzemüller understands these biography generators as social institutions, propelling the process of the construction of a biography. They have one thing in common: They all need time. They need time for introspection and time for the potential to record one’s own experiences in the first place. In late-nineteenth-century New York City, the majority of the population is likely to have had neither, as working conditions in New York City were famously bad.<sup>157</sup> Introspection can be described as the examination of one’s own mental, physical, and emotional states. As pointed out in the early remarks made in *Autobiography*, his “unusual introspective” character led Werther to the practice of writing. This element of introspection as the creation of awareness, was subsequently followed by a second element as soon as Werther acquired medical and sexological knowledge: it became a possibility as well as a mission for Werther to educate, so “that every medical man, every lawyer, and every other friend of science [...] will [...] be moved to say a kind word for any of the despised and oppressed step-children of Nature.”<sup>158</sup> The “attitude of the profession”<sup>159</sup> that declined to publish his autobiography for more than 18 years, has “been in almost entire ignorance of the existence of this variety of the *genus homo*.”<sup>160</sup> While only Werther’s later writing was – heavily – influenced by medical approaches, all of Werther’s texts heretofore known were published by medical journals.<sup>161</sup> It is important to note, however, that the later texts clearly

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<sup>155</sup> Herzog, introduction, 15.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas Etzemüller, *Biographien*, (Frankfurt: Campus, 2012) 20.

<sup>157</sup> Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham: New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present* (New York: Fordham University Press 1956), 205.

<sup>158</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 18.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>161</sup> Except for Werther’s proposed third book, *Riddle of the Underworld*, which remains unpublished. Randall Sell found parts of its manuscript in the papers of Victor Robinson in 2010. Robinson was the editor of *Medical Life* and had a contract with Werther to publish *Riddle of the Underworld*. It was advertised in *The Female*

also contain elements that do not stem from medical discourse. It would be an underestimation of Werther's agency and his self-writing practice to reduce his texts to the influence of the medical profession.

In fact, close readings of these texts will call into question their clear identification as sexological scientific writings in general. We can identify diary entries, a reader's letter, sexological writings, poems, auto-ethnographic descriptions of New York and its suburbs, and other genres. Many of these identified genres align to what Etzemüller terms biography generators. This chapter will examine his self-writing in relation to this understanding of generating an autobiography. The first aspect was heavily influenced by sexological ideas that shaped his texts, and is thus called 'sexological writing.' Besides the sexological writing practice, this chapter analyzes two more practices: A confessional writing practice first and an auto-ethnographical practice second, the latter of which is unique due to Werther's intimate knowledge of the so-called New York underworld.<sup>162</sup> Werther's practice of writing is thus closely intertwined with the experiences made by moving from rural Connecticut to turn-of-the-century New York City. The available sources make it clear that moving was a turning point in Werther's life, at the very least with regard to his self-writing practice. Yet, a close reading of his texts also is telling of a broader rearrangement in medical sciences that "caused the rituals of confession to function within the norms of scientific regularity."<sup>163</sup> Confessions were still made in religious conduct but increasingly, physicians and doctors became the persons to consult when habitual behavior was not aligned with the idealized gendered versions, or, more specifically – as in Werther's case –, when men acted effeminately. As an amplifier and reminder of what was perceived as normal conduct, there were multiple archetypes and tropes permeating the urban space in New York City.

In addition to Werther's understanding and appropriation of Victorian Womanhood (exemplified by equating women with children) discussed by Shaheen, there were many more contemporary ideas and concepts that influenced perceptions of gender and sexuality in turn-of-the-century New York City. Among those are the self-made man, the confidence man<sup>164</sup> as

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*Impersonators* but was never published for unknown reasons. Victor Robinson Papers 1898–1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28.

<sup>162</sup> It is unique because there are no other depictions of the meeting places of androgynes, the cruising areas, and other networks of interest for non-normative gender and sexual identities in New York, at least in the late nineteenth century. In the 1910s, journalist and author Djuna Barnes wrote about Bohemian lifestyles in Greenwich Village among other places, but although both authors, Barnes and Werther had overlapping interests in a cultural off-scene, Werther's writings were far more eclectic and explicit than Barnes's articles for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for instance.

<sup>163</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, an Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 65.

<sup>164</sup> The term 'confidence man,' for example first appeared in a *New York Herald* story in 1849. The confidence man was a man who took advantage of people by gaining their confidence, convincing them to trust him with

well as the new woman;<sup>165</sup> and varying constructions of these archetypes and tropes were disseminating new concepts and solidifying others with regard to gender and sexuality. These concepts seem to at least partly have appeared in the turn-of-the-century urban environment of New York City for the first time. A city that has “posed a challenge to interpretation,”<sup>166</sup> that “exposes the fact that space and identities are never given and static, not simply received from tradition, language or environment, that [...] imply processes rather than essences, [...] such processes are relational and open-ended rather than predetermined, and [...] they involve the interweaving of expression and imprint, and their difference,”<sup>167</sup> as Esther Romeyn writes, citing Rainer Nägele. Within this city, “the nature of identity was captured in a discourse that pitted authenticity against theatricality and its trappings, impersonation, disguise, imposture, and illusion.”<sup>168</sup> Here, in the highly contested archetypes of American men and women, ideas of gender and sexuality were shaped and disseminated through various fields of knowledge, covering diverse fields such as medical and legal discourse, as well as everyday encounters not fully understandable by either discursive analysis or macro-historical approaches alone. The approach used in this chapter therefore argues that the distinct agency that propelled Werther was not solely based on one practice alone, as for example the *flânerie* proposed by Shaheen. Assuming that there was “no end to his search for either sex or self”<sup>169</sup> because it “transports him internally to the state of childhood”<sup>170</sup> neglects the resistant self-writings of Werther that give voice to both this endless search and the state of childhood, amongst many other states and/or self-identifications. This chapter thus avoids focusing solely on the persona of the female impersonator and Werther’s sprees through New York streets. It also avoids applying solely medical categorizations of age, gender, sexuality, and/or disability. Instead, the following three subchapters extrapolate Werther’s less exposed, exoticized, and thus pathologized everyday activity of self-writing.

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their possessions, and then stealing those possessions. It was a male archetype of Victorian middle-class culture, symbolizing middle-class Americans’ anxiety about predatory male behavior. Thomas Winter, “Confidence Man,” in *American Masculinities, A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003).

<sup>165</sup> At the end of the 19th century, the “new woman had emerged as a figure in both fiction and non-fiction to describe what many regarded as the worrying changes in the behavior, the activities and the demeanor of women.” Elizabeth Jane Cochran (Nellie Bly) was regarded as the New American Girl as early as 1883, preempting the figure of the New Woman by a couple of years. See Part II – Elizabeth Jane Cochran (Nellie Bly). See Stephon Garton, *Histories of Sexuality, Antiquity to Sexual Revolution* (London: Equinox, 2004).

<sup>166</sup> Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes, Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) XI.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 925.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

### 3.1. Moving to New York City – Where “one can live as nature demands”

Werther did not move to New York City in 1891 in hopes of the more unrestricted mobility of queer life in a big city, as one might imagine. He did not move to New York City as a seventeen-year-old to be able to live life as a self-described effeminate man – or to follow his later vocation as a female impersonator. In fact, it was – according to how Werther presented his story – quite the contrary. Angelo-Phyllis, a cross-dresser whose accounts Werther later embedded in *The Female Impersonators*, described New York City as a metropolis where “one can live as Nature demands without setting every one’s tongue wagging.”<sup>171</sup> Angelo-Phyllis’ perception of queer life in New York City invokes the notion of a rural space in which everybody notices and talks about one’s sexuality, a stereotypical depiction of the countryside as underdeveloped and less progressive in terms of sexual and gender identities; a belief many people share until today. But through rural queer studies we know that “rural and small-town Americans were never unaware that some people inhabited their bodies in slightly peculiar ways, or that others engaged in sexual conduct with members of the same sex.”<sup>172</sup> However, there are very few notes on Werther’s life in Connecticut as a self-perceived effeminate adolescent in his texts, and whether there were any people or networks that would have supported non-normative gendered behavior in the mill town in which he grew up.

This spatial dimension of the lives of sexual and gendered identities needs to be taken in account and is not trivial. But the division does not take place between rural and urban spaces. It is not as clear-cut as Angelo-Phyllis would have it, equating the city with an unfettered queer life and rural communities with a much more restricted, gossip-charged panopticon. All communities, whether small towns or metropolises, were differently engaged with non-normative bodies and identities. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that there are no sources in regard to Werther’s rural upbringing outside of his self-reflections. In addition, the information given on his Connecticut homestead is rather scarce because of his need to hide his real identity. What we do know is that Werther embedded into his *Autobiography* an account of his desire to rid himself of his self-perceived effeminate behavior when moving to New York City. He writes that his “intention from the age of fifteen to nineteen [was] to pass my life as a foreign missionary and preacher of the Gospel...”<sup>173</sup> Werther finally relinquished his desire to become a foreign missionary, as it was “inconsistent with the much stronger

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<sup>171</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 201.

<sup>172</sup> Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks, Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>173</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 44.

appetency of the fairie, which finally carried all good resolutions before it.”<sup>174</sup> This makes for a peculiar coming-of-age narrative that provides at least two things. First, Werther presents himself as a devout Methodist that tries hard to do away with his effeminacy. Second, he refers to the instinctiveness and natural character of his urges. As a consequence, both of these particular and reoccurring self-descriptions shape his narrative, both lines of discourse form part of an underlying argument. In order to write as deliberately as he did about his life, he needed to be an expert in both religious and medical discourse. Self-fashioning as an expert furthermore underscored and emphasized his authority – an authority that would in fact influence medico-legal reasoning.

To publish an autobiography, a novel, or any kind of text that was openly sympathetic to non-normative gender and sexual identities outside of the medical profession was not yet possible in the United States of the turn of the century.<sup>175</sup> In fact, “frank or sympathetic depictions of gay life in print were still a rarity in the United States”<sup>176</sup> in the 1910s and 1920s. Werther thus needed to acquire a vast sexological knowledge to ready his self-writings for publication, which he did by consulting physicians and visiting medical libraries, as for example the New York Academy of Medicine Library. Only with this knowledge and the access he gained to the *Medico-Legal Journal* in New York as an assistant clerk, it became possible to write about his sexual encounters, about the places where female impersonators met, about the 1890s cruising areas in New York City, the letters and poems to his lovers, the street violence against him, and the plea for a change in medical reasoning towards non-normative gender and sexual identities. His self-writing was built on experiences gained outside of medical reasoning. But as turn-of-the-century sexology in the United States was heavily influenced by European sexology, Werther became an expert in mid-nineteenth-century accounts of sexualities as well and it informed his self-descriptions, leading him to self-describe as an Urning in *Autobiography* at one point, for example.<sup>177</sup> Even within the medical profession, sympathizing with what Werther would eventually call ‘androgynes’ came with a price. In Werther’s case, the price was to acknowledge being “sexually abnormal by birth” and thereby fall under the scrutiny of the scientists’ gaze. But Werther did not fall solely under the gaze of the scientists, or of the *Medico-Legal Journal*’s physicians and

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<sup>174</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 40.

<sup>175</sup> Aaron H. Devor, Nicholas Matte, “ONE Inc. and Reed Erickson, The Uneasy Collaboration of Gay and Trans Activism, 1964–2003,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006) 387.

<sup>176</sup> Heise, “Degenerate Sex and the City,” 317.

<sup>177</sup> A term brought up by the lawyer and early-sexologist Karl-Heinz Ulrichs in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. It was basically a synonym for the term “sexual invert”; referring to a man with the soul of a woman or vice versa. See Sigusch, *Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft*, 148.

lawyers. He, in contrast with most non-normative gender and sexual identities, eventually became a lay scientist himself, thereby turning around the physician's gaze.

When Werther moved to New York, it thus profoundly changed his path. It is hard to imagine that Werther would have had access to this specific nexus of knowledge in any other city in the United States. The red-light districts, his later cruising areas, the Methodists' center, as well as the library of the New York Academy of Medicine – they all belonged to differentially situated spaces with specific languages, behaviors, ideas, and practices that shaped his extra-curricular activities. Werther moved to New York City to become a clergyman, but gained a formal education studying “languages and philology.” In *Autobiography*, there are no indications that he intended to become a female impersonator at any point before going to New York City. A few of his articles in *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology*, published in 1918 and 1919, indicate that Werther considered himself an effeminate boy in his childhood days. The articles tell the story of a melancholic boy. Writing in third person, Werther makes oneself out to be the “Fairie-Boy,” the “Girl-Boy,” or simply the “Boy – But Never Man.”<sup>178</sup> Using a third-person narrative however he at the same time distances himself from the boy, girl-boy, and boy-not-men in the articles. This is thus at the same time an effect and a strategy of his self-writing practice and can be best understood as a (dis-)identification practice. There is never a pause, or to be more precise, a longevity in his self-identifications. He is either forced to occupy the spaces in between identification markers, or consciously appropriate them – due to spatial circumstances — in this case, writing in a medical journal – a space of medico-legal discourse. As a consequence, Werther seems to be a case-study as well as a colleague to his editor Herzog – which makes it a necessity for Werther to distance himself from his own past in his writing style. At the same time, through this act of distancing, he acquires an agency over his own past in the eyes of the medico-legal profession.

In addition to this reasoning of (dis-)identification – self-fashioning as a boy-not-man or a girl-boy in his text – and at the same time assuming an authorial persona by being an author for yet another medical journal – there are more probable motives for this self-writing practice. In one of the aforementioned articles that feature his adolescence and childhood he also mentions a suicide attempt after being raped by two men who proclaimed to want to make “a man out of him.”<sup>179</sup> In the same article, he states that “no other class of human beings has such a burden of melancholy to bear” and that thousands of them are driven to suicide out

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<sup>178</sup> Werther, “The Fairie Boy,”; Werther, “The Girl-Boy's Suicide,”; Werther, “Boy – But Never Man,”.

<sup>179</sup> Werther, “The Girl-Boy's Suicide,” 499.



of every generation, and yet the world is unmoved by their sorrows.”<sup>180</sup> But Werther’s writings also give a vivid account of how much he, as a self-identified effeminate man, feared New York City, even though he had “frequently visited New York and wished to reside there”<sup>181</sup> prior to entering college. So, while he at least had some idea of New York and what to expect there, Werther formulates one thing that stands out, he “had [...] no intention of ever yielding to my detested instincts for female-impersonation.”<sup>182</sup> There were, evidently, many violent encounters for Werther either in rural Connecticut and or in New York City. Again, in the early 1890s his objective is – as he posits – to become a missionary. This narrative is aligned with stating that he knew that “residence in a great city would make temptation far stronger than in a village.”<sup>183</sup> This maneuvering between various self-makings thus shows how he fights for a change for non-normative genders and identities. Eventually his attempted changes extend the help that missionaries would have given to these people and Werther as a consequence becomes an auto-ethnographical writer and activist for New York City’s non-normative gender and sexuality identities.

Following Werther into New York City at the beginning of the 1890s, we must presume that he had no notion of life in the underworld.<sup>184</sup> But, even without an understanding of the underworld, New York City was depicted as an adventurous place to come to. As a guidebook of 1891 intimidated to the inexperienced traveler, “[a]n arrival in New York, or any other large city, alone and for the first time, is an ordeal to which many persons look forward with justifiable dread.”<sup>185</sup> The underworld in comparison was even worse. It was a kind of narrative fantasy popular in contemporary discourse. In New York City, these often were the quarters of immigrants and working-class people. Here, established nighttime entertainment was to be found, “palaces of amusement,” submerged region[s] of poverty, degradation, and disease;” in short, it was the “underworld of vice and crime.”<sup>186</sup> Thomas Heise describes the underworld of Greenwich Village as “a real and imagined territory of prostitutes, gay men and

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<sup>180</sup> Werther, “The Girl-Boy’s Suicide,” 499.

<sup>181</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 82.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> For the reoccurring imagery of the underworld in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Literature see the brilliant analysis by Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010) in which he argues that the specter of the underworld reappeared in forms as disparate as in Jacob Riis’ *How the other Half Lives* to Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* because, as Heise outlines, the city was the battleground on which the meaning of narratives was being worked and split by the forces of capital.

<sup>185</sup> Ernest Ingersoll, *A Week in New York*, Rand McNally & Co’s Illustrated Guide to the American Metropolis (New York: Rand McNally 1891), 212.

<sup>186</sup> Ernest W. Burgess, “The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project,” in *The City, Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment*, eds. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967 [1925]), cited in: Heise, “Degenerate Sex,” 292.

women, and bohemian artists and writers”<sup>187</sup> in the 1910s and 1920s. But in the 1890s, as Chauncey shows, it was not yet Greenwich Village (or Harlem and Times Square, which would become famous for their gay life in the 1910s and 1920s) which was marked as a distinct gay neighborhood enclave. Instead, it was the Bowery that “gay men had made the [...] center of gay life.”<sup>188</sup> Werther’s writings about the 1890s led contemporary readers to a few of these gay Bowery centers, as for example Columbia Hall, which was colloquially termed Paresis Hall, and considered the “principal resort in New York for degenerates” and “one of the sights for out-of-towners.”<sup>189</sup> On Werther’s path from the desire to become a foreign-missionary to a female impersonator and chronicler of 1890s New York City’s non-normative districts, he met physicians, alienists, college professors, classmates, ruffians,<sup>190</sup> soldiers,<sup>191</sup> and policemen. He passed through brothels, military forts, small train stations in the outskirts, parks, dive-bars, shelters, low clubrooms, dive-bars, jails, cruised the streets, preached from the pulpit, and was engaged in mission work in what he considered the slums.

The underworld was vividly depicted in newspaper articles or tourist guides. Even when New York City guidebooks did not directly mention the specific locales or used the term ‘underworld’ for the Bowery, guidebooks made the readers aware of its saloons and the people one would be likely to encounter. In *A Week in New York* for example, published by the renowned and popular Rand McNally publishing company in 1891, the Bowery was covered in a segment called “A Ramble in the Night”<sup>192</sup> and described as “always crowded and full of life,” a place where “on the sidewalks hoodlums abound; and not only hoodlums of the sterner sex, but hoodlums of the gentler and amiable type of humanity – female hoodlums, from thirteen to sixteen years of age.”<sup>193</sup> In the Bowery, “[t]he street swarms with them, and they seem to ‘know it all.’ Not wholly bad, perhaps, but on the road to being so.”<sup>194</sup> This was the scene in which Werther later came to be a female impersonator, thereby also engaging in

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<sup>187</sup> Heise, “Degenerate Sex,” 287.

<sup>188</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York* 2.

<sup>189</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 148. The name was either taken from a medical term for insanity or derived from the name of a patent medicine that was advertised in saloons. *The Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* deemed it a boy brothel, making it one of at least six others on the Bowery in the 1890s.

<sup>190</sup> Physically strong men he was attracted to. Sometimes also termed as “rough trade” – often also connected to a racialized perception of Italian and Irish immigrants.

<sup>191</sup> In *Autobiography*, soldiers are frequently mentioned as his lovers. He regularly visited cities’ military forts to search for hypermasculine soldiers. He looked “upon a youthful professional soldier as a most wonderful being, different from all other human beings [...] Merely the process of enlistment, the donning of the uniform, and the acquiring of skill in handling the weapons of warfare make a demigod out of the young man, as your author looks upon it.” Werther, *Autobiography*, 99.

<sup>192</sup> Ingersoll, *A Week in New York*, 212.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

criminal activity in the prosecutor's eye.<sup>195</sup> Most passers-by would most likely have taken Werther as a female hoodlum as well, wearing clothes that were identified to ostensibly belong to the opposite sex. Focusing on his diary and the missionary work described therein, it becomes clear, however, that he may very well have come to know these quarters by way of his faith. Missionary work was often done in residential areas of immigrants and the working-class. The Methodists' piety, benevolence, and conviction of salvation as well as their missionary zealotry brought many of them to exactly those quarters that Werther would soon roam as Jennie June. The Methodists' headquarter in New York City, the "Methodist Book Concern" building, was located on the very street on which Werther would gather his first female impersonation experiences.

"One can live as nature demands," is the euphemism Angelo-Phyllis uses to describe female impersonation sprees in Werther's *The Female Impersonators*. References to a vague nature and instinct is not uncommon in many of the self-descriptive passages of Werther's texts as well. But in what was most likely his first winter as a student and resident in New York City from 1891 to 1892, his objective was to figure out how he would avoid being a female impersonator. The self-descriptions in his texts written at that time are mostly melancholic and chagrined. For instance, he documents having had "Paroxysms of Melancholia"<sup>196</sup> that made his "muscles seemed to be rigid"<sup>197</sup> and "within a few minutes, [his] strength would be completely gone," fearing to "become permanently and violently insane."<sup>198</sup> In retrospect, he attributes these attacks "largely to unsatisfied, involuntary yearnings for the mate which Nature had designed me to have."<sup>199</sup> He felt to have an "abnormal sexual nature,"<sup>200</sup> not only referring to sexual conduct but also to his "dual

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<sup>195</sup> A man in clothes identified as female was not solely a female impersonator but also a gender traitor, because in Victorian thought, female impersonation was considered to be a total reversal of one's sex role. Female impersonation in the late nineteenth century was considered characteristic of sexual inversion. Thus, female impersonators were suspected to be sodomists, which was defined in an 1886 criminal law revision, as one who "[c]arnally knows any male or female person in any manner contrary to nature; or [v]oluntarily submits to such carnal knowledge" and punished with a penalty for 5-20 years in prison. "The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers, The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States," accessed May 13, 2015, [http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/new\\_york.htm](http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/new_york.htm). Moreover, there were laws against cross-dressing in almost every state of the United States in the nineteenth century. At least two states had laws that were construed to regulate cross-dressing. New York State in 1845 made it a crime to assemble "disguised" in public places, but in 1876 amended the law to allow "masquerade of fancy dress ball[s]" if police permission were obtained. No later than 1890, and probably well before, police were applying this disguise law to cross-dressers. William N. Eskridge, *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>196</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 54.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 71.

nature,”<sup>201</sup> as “it was not alone fellatio that I craved, but also to be looked upon and treated as a member of the gentler sex.”<sup>202</sup> The invocation of the “gentler sex” relates to a broader medical and religious discourse on gender and sexuality. Both medical and religious discourses of gender and sexuality were intertwined with contemporary scientific interest in biology – popularized especially by the advent of sexology in the medical profession.<sup>203</sup> To be perceived by others and oneself as an effeminate man for example was the antitype of proper conduct in nineteenth-century America and deemed as unnatural behavior. In Victorian thought, people’s sex roles were not limited to their behavioral roles in sexual relations, as Chauncey points out. An effeminate man was the mark of a sexual aberration for contemporaries, not only because that any “man who behaved as if he had rejected his masculinity must have generated considerable anxiety on the part of other men,”<sup>204</sup> but also because his behavior “implicitly challenged the biological basis attributed to the prescribed male role.”<sup>205</sup> To declare oneself as living according to (his/her) natural demands in New York City in the early 1920s, as depicted by Angelo-Phyllis, was an entirely different affair from the situation that Werther described in his diaries when he first came to New York. It wasn’t until the late 1890s that Werther’s reference to a certain “design of nature”<sup>206</sup> or “a sexual nature”<sup>207</sup> first and foremost became a strategy against a sexological differentiation between congenital and acquired homosexuality. This was a discussion between two schools of sexology in turn-of-the-century western medical profession. When Werther arrived in New York City, he most likely was not aware of this discussion. This important argument in sexology will be later focused on in Werther’s modality of sexological writing. It will lead to the question how the practice of writing would reshape his interest in female impersonation in the following years. But the focus first needs to be put on his religiosity, his devout self-identification because, as I argue, it influenced and shaped his writing as well as helping him to have his works published later in life.

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<sup>201</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 60.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> In Werther’s writings, this stance is most obvious in the manuscript of *Riddle of the Underworld* where he refers to Mendel’s law: “Since its publication (*Autobiography*) I have read that according to the Mendelian law, an effeminate son is likely to be the offspring of a mannish woman.” A notion that led him to interrogate his own family background, concluding that it might generally be true, but not in his case.

<sup>204</sup> George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization Of Female Deviance,” in *Salmagundi*, 58/59, (Fall 1982–Winter 1983), 142.

<sup>205</sup> Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” 142.

<sup>206</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 54.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2. Confessional writings – Preparation of a “secondary personality”<sup>208</sup>

In all of his published books, articles, and letters, Werther identified as a deeply religious person. In *The Female Impersonators*, his second book, he mentions having been raised Methodist.<sup>209</sup> American Methodism is not a monolithic form of religion, and is comprised of various group of churches and denominations. It is not possible to identify Werther’s denomination through the sources at hand. The cultural changes in gender roles in home, church, and society around the turn of the century inspired changes in the ministry of many Methodist bodies, such as increased women’s involvement, advocacy of women suffrage, or full clergy rights for women.<sup>210</sup> Still, Werther’s religious beliefs and his recurring religious self-description as indicated by diary entries in *Autobiography*, clearly were highly troublesome for him as, since his childhood days, his self-perception of an effeminate boy did not align to his religious understanding of gender and sexuality. It was not least religious discourse by which white middle-class ideals of “a True Womanhood, True Manhood, and True Love, all characterized by ‘purity’ – the freedom from sensuality [...]” were propelled. Furthermore, “early Victorian True Love was only realized within the mode of proper procreation, marriage, the legal organization for producing a new set of correctly gendered women and men.”<sup>211</sup> These tensions between self-perception and religious morality manifested in Werther’s diaries.

Werther presents himself as a very educated and literate person, as a “model student” that “hardly had a rival in respect to high standing in all my studies.”<sup>212</sup> He enrolled at a university in New York City, which “was most probably Columbia or New York University” as Katz and other historians suggest.<sup>213</sup> Werther self-confidently assesses that he “turned out to be perhaps the best linguist in my college class,”<sup>214</sup> his interest being in “languages and

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<sup>208</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 60.

<sup>209</sup> Nonetheless, as Billingsley describes, Methodism often emphasized bible study at home and was accompanied by a new style of passionate sermons. Among Methodists, “personal holiness and refraining from worldly activities such as drinking, smoking, and card playing” was accentuated. Missionary work was supported by active missionary societies, therefore the role of missionaries was held in high regard. Scott C. Billingsley, *It’s a New Day, Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2008), 15.

<sup>210</sup> Wendy J. Deichmann, “American Methodism in the Twentieth Century: Reform, Redefinition, and Renewal,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, ed. Jason E. Vickers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102.

<sup>211</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” in *Privilege, A Reader*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003).

<sup>212</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 43.

<sup>213</sup> “Werther Research Effort,” accessed March 25, 2016, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/katz-writing-work/wertherresearch>.

<sup>214</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 27.

philology most of all.”<sup>215</sup> He later received his baccalaureate degree with honors. Werther’s descriptions of his early days in New York City circle around his perception as a religious person, deeply troubled because of his sexual desires. As a consequence, he attempted to get rid of these desires with the help of religiously charged moral commitments. Two years prior to his move to New York City, he describes himself as developing into a religious prodigy:

The congregation in church in extempore prayer [...] spending a full two hours daily in private religious exercises for the next two years. At this time I definitely chose the Christian ministry in a heathen land as my field of labor [...]. This greatly increased interest in religion fortunately put a stop to my morbid reveries. I now looked upon my yearning for fellatio as my ‘besetting sin,’ and until the age of nineteen fought against it as few others have struggled to be freed from lustful desires.<sup>216</sup>

When Werther arrived in New York, he was highly influenced and driven by his interest in religion. Every diary entry cited in *Autobiography* consists of melancholic passages, struggling with his self-perception as an effeminate man. Long before appropriating and inventing the sexological theory of a male-sex scale, in which he would position himself as an ultra-androgyne, he already attributes his desires to a self-understanding of himself being a woman in a man’s body in these diaries. The self-examination of his body as (partly) female therefore indicates a naturalization and vindication of his desires and instincts. He writes about how his “genitals became pubescent as early as the completion of my fifteenth year”<sup>217</sup>, asking himself (and the professional reader) whether “this [is] not unusually early for a male, but the proper age for a female? Whether or not as a partial effect of this beginning of pseudo-puberty, I simultaneously developed into a religious prodigy.”<sup>218</sup> In New York City, he thus carried on with his religious work, so that “[d]uring the first two years I was regularly engaged in mission work in the slums as an avocation,” preaching “about twelve times from the pulpit, besides being the leader of about a hundred secondary church services.”<sup>219</sup> Coming from an “eminently respectable religious”<sup>220</sup> background in a New England mill town, he went to college in New York City in order to become “a preacher of the Gospel [...] entering the Christian ministry”<sup>221</sup> someday. This seemed his vocation, far off from what he soon would become: a “low-class fairie,” an “ultra-androgyne,” and a “sexual invert.” He later writes that he in fact would have been “holy enough to be a clergyman if it were not from my sins arising from my abnormal passion...”<sup>222</sup> These melancholic writings are part of

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<sup>215</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 56/57.

irresolvable inconsistencies until he moved to New York City, where he found a space in which sexological knowledge was acquirable and sexual connections in the so-called underworld became a possibility. Furthermore, early-1890s New York was a place in which female impersonation seemed possible. As a consequence, the contradiction between perceiving himself as a potential clergyman and his bodily and sexual desires did not vanish. Here, his melancholic writing combines with what could be termed confessions, or confessional writing. Thus, traceable in this writing is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge, yet only as the traces of an unmourned and unmournable love. His self-fashioning through writing present idealized notions of masculinity and femininity. Within the macro-historical setting described by Judith Butler as a 'heterosexual matrix,' these gendered notions are strengthened through the repudiations that they perform.<sup>223</sup>

It is important to identify the shifting narrative levels, the different time periods and the different genres of Werther's writing, by which he produced various notions of self-identification. Although all of his texts were published between the end of 1918 and 1922, he often cites his own diaries started in the late 1880s. A version of his first book *Autobiography* had already been finished by the end of 1899. *Autobiography* is also the only publication in which Werther directly quotes from his diaries. The original diaries have been lost, and unlike with *Riddle of the Underworld*, his unpublished last manuscript, no manuscripts of *Autobiography* and *The Female Impersonators* exist which could offer further insight into the structure and production of his writing. While the bulk of *Autobiography* had been written in the 1890s, it is safe to say that some changes were made in the 18 years that he tried to publish the book. This is evident in a few paragraphs that seem to indicate being older unedited parts that Werther embedded in *Autobiography*, because he comments on these passages in footnotes. One passage is a direct indicator for his changing self-perception and awareness. In one of the presumably older unedited parts of *Autobiography*, titled "Abstinence Would Wreck Life,"<sup>224</sup> he quotes himself asserting "before God that I am confident that I commit no sin in obeying this instinct."<sup>225</sup> He refers to his "conduct" and the assumption that "the only legitimate relations are between a legally married pair,"<sup>226</sup> but that this "duty [...] is not binding on urnings."<sup>227</sup> In the accompanying footnote, Werther writes

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<sup>223</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power, Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 140.

<sup>224</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 92–93.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

that at “that time I incorrectly described myself as an urning,”<sup>228</sup> elaborating further: “Urnings are, at least usually, active pederasts, or else addicted to mutual onanism.”<sup>229</sup> The term ‘Urnung’ was coined by lawyer, writer, and advocate for the rights of persecuted gender- and sexual nonconformist men, Karl Heinz Ulrichs. Seven years prior to Werther’s assumed date of birth, at the 1867 *Sixth German Congress of Jurists* in Munich, Ulrichs tried to convince his fellow lawyers that acts by ‘Urnunge’ – whom he defined as men with the souls of women – were not to be persecuted.<sup>230</sup> In one of the later corrections in *Autobiography*, Werther writes: “The Urning or active pederast loves an adolescent as a normal man loves a woman, and desires active paedicatio [pederasty] or else mutual onanism. The passive invert loves the adolescent as a woman loves a man, and desires fellatio, or occasionally the part of the pathic in paedicatio.”<sup>231</sup> Although the terminology also indicated a kind of sexual inversion, of men having the souls of women, Werther carefully distinguishes himself from this term later, because “this autobiography deals with the passive invert, or ‘the invert’ properly speaking”<sup>232</sup> Werther underscores an orthodox gendered binary system that distinguishes between active men and passive women. This understanding of his identity would, in *The Female Impersonators*, be rearranged and differentiated again later.

Every diary entry written, cited, and occasionally corrected in *Autobiography* not only shows a movement away from what was perceived to be proper conduct for men and women, but at the same time reaffirms late-nineteenth-century binary gender performances. Decent conduct also was embedded in prevalent archetypes such as the self-made man or Victorian womanhood. These archetypes disseminated and (re-)produced the suitable gender behavior to a great extent. Werther reaffirms and rearranges these archetypes at the same time, indicating a certain vagueness and flexibility of these archetypal structures. This is evidently apparent, as we have seen in his references to an effeminate childhood and youth, in the melancholic writings about the struggle between religiosity and effeminate self-perception, as well as in the evocation of an inherently natural quality of his womanhood. Shaheen points out that with Werther’s insistence “on the conceptual solidity of those oppositional units”<sup>233</sup> – that is of man and woman –, inventing “the childlike woman he believes himself to be”<sup>234</sup> made him all the more “able to reify the construct of feminine Victorian virtue.”<sup>235</sup> This is

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<sup>228</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 92–93.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Volkmar Sigusch, *Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2008), 148.

<sup>231</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 30.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 928.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.



true if one focuses on the representations of normative behavior of gender and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But by taking into account the practice of writing, one is able to detect something beyond the representations of “purity, piety, and perpetual adolescence”<sup>236</sup> associated with Victorian womanhood. Even if Werther infantilizes himself as the “Boy – But never a Man,” “The Fairie Boy,” and “The Girl-Boy,” or if, as Shaheen puts it, “his sexual contact he achieves with other men transports him internally to the state of childhood,”<sup>237</sup> I want to suggest that the same cannot be said to hold true for his practice of writing. As we have seen, Werther from an early age mentions wanting to be a writer with his “name chiselled (sic) on the walls of fame.”<sup>238</sup> With his obsessive writing, his longing for fame, and his rearrangements of subject positions, he also battled the archetype of the self-made man that has been central to American constructions of masculinity since the early nineteenth century. With the spread of the self-made man archetype in American culture, men – especially in the economically competitive, late-nineteenth-century New York City – were expected to perform self-control, self-reliance and an unmalleable character necessary for success. Werther presents himself as the opposite in his texts, describing a man on the verge of losing control, melancholic and effeminate. But to write obsessively about melancholy and desires on the other hand also, paradoxically, requires a structure of self-control, discipline, hard work, self-reliance and the belief in upward mobility, all parts of the archetype of the self-made man. The female impersonator that Werther came to be could therefore be argued to have been a distinct, New York City version of the American self-made man.

In Werther’s diaries, his struggle to conceptualize a stable identity is discernable. Today’s readers, however, not only register his engagement with producing a viable identity, but also the changes in his self-perception over time and the discursive systems these identities align to. In American middle-class culture of the nineteenth century, a vast literature of advice on personal conduct could be found. These conduct-of-life manuals depicted, for example, the ‘confidence man’ and the ‘painted woman.’ These figurations were charged with the assumption that they both “could manipulate facial expression, manner, and personal appearance in a calculated effort to lure the guileless into granting them confidence,”<sup>239</sup> as Karen Halttunen explains. In turn, panic and anxiety about being deceived and manipulated was abundant, as men and women were on the move socially and geographically. The androgyne, the female impersonator, the urning, the fairie and the sexual invert – all self-

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<sup>236</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 934.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 925.

<sup>238</sup> Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 83.

<sup>239</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women, A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) XV.

identifications used by Werther – all differed from the confidence man and the painted woman, but nonetheless had something in common with their perceptions: moral depravity and the potential to deceive others. Haltunen calls to attention two contemporary questions: “In what was believed to be a fluid social world where no one occupied a fixed social position, the question ‘Who am I?’ loomed large; and in an urban social world where many of the people who met face-to-face each day were strangers, the question ‘Who are you really?’ assumed even greater significance.”<sup>240</sup> In late-nineteenth-century New York City, assumed fixed social positions were perceived to be even more unstable due to immigration and rapid technological changes both in the workplace and the urban environment. Archetypes of Victorian middle-class culture, both the confidence man and the painted women were threats to corrupt men and women. These threats were looming even larger over the figuration of the androgyne and fairie, because both could not be identified with a stable gender.

What was the societal perception towards androgynes, fairies and sexual inverts; people neither man nor woman? Werther, as one of the few known androgynous people who wrote, let the contemporary reader take part into this dizzying rearrangement of identities within the power grid of normative gender and sexualities of the 1890s when he immersed himself in melancholic, confessional writing on the brink of life and death. He reported numerous assaults he endured while on his cross-dressing sprees in New York City. He also reported the suicides and homicides of androgynes in New York City: “Androgynes are murdered every few month in New York merely because of intense hatred of effeminacy instilled by education in the breasts of full-fledged males.”<sup>241</sup> In this sense, writing was not only a practice of introspection that propelled Werther, but also an attempt to rework an often-hostile environment he and other androgynes faced. This was also inseparably part of the queer underworld Werther wrote about. Writing was therefore, on the one hand, aligned with practices such as reading and historical research on the other, presumably, queer persons. This, then – on the other hand – resembled a “form of retreat and return, the fundamental pastoral movement.”<sup>242</sup>

In *Autobiography*, Werther cites his own diaries intermittently; and in each of these self-citations, his sinful behavior is the prevalent topic. Christianity had a pervasive influence on American culture at the end of the nineteenth century, as Leigh Eric Schmidt demonstrates on the basis of the “complementary yet contested relationship”<sup>243</sup> between Christianity and

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<sup>240</sup> Haltunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, XV.

<sup>241</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 132.

<sup>242</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

<sup>243</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Easter Parade, Piety, Fashion, and Display,” in *Religion and American Culture, A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 247.

commercial culture. This is important to note, because the “growth of a consumer economy also fostered a new pleasure ethic,”<sup>244</sup> challenging “the early Victorian work ethic finally helping to usher in a major transformation of values.”<sup>245</sup> This slow transformation reshaped gender and sexuality to a great extent. As we have seen, Werther’s move to New York City and his earlier struggles were highly influenced and problematized by his religious hopes of heavenly salvation against his desires for earthly pleasures. He could not help but notice this new pleasure ethic when arriving in New York. A city does not acquire the nickname the “city that never sleeps” for no reason.<sup>246</sup> One of the quarters that helped New York get this nickname was the Bowery with its saloons, brothels, and dive bars. A few of the customers of these locales would later become Werther’s friends, lovers, and political allies. Nonetheless, he distinguished himself from most of them by writing about his piety and the immorality of others. In quotations from his diaries, he still hopes for salvation, accompanied by a class distinction away “from the immoral and godless crowd”<sup>247</sup> that “looked upon [him] as a simpleton by those greatly inferior to [him] in mental ability.”<sup>248</sup> The following is another diary quote in *Autobiography*:

I am satiated with sensual pleasure. It is the vanity of vanities. Good deeds done our fellow men are the best investment in life. I pray God to send forth laborers into His harvest, and to let me be one. When I see the multitude of young people wandering astray, as sheep without a shepherd, the words of scripture ring through my ears, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people!' Sometimes I seem to have a clairvoyant vision into the future, and behold myself, finally saved from animality, commissioned by the great I AM to be a proclaimer of the blessed Gospel of peace and good will among men.<sup>249</sup>

The early diary entries cited in *Autobiography* indicate that he grew up in a literate and religious environment. The embedded excerpts are written like confessions. Werther is “satiated with sensual pleasure” and therefore seeks to be “saved from animality.” Werther likely knew that by exhibiting his vanities to the professional readers of *Autobiography*, he would be perceived as unfaithful and troubled. In addition, the frank discussion of his sensuality served as an affirmation of his self-perceived and problematized effeminacy. He however accomplished two other important things by embedding and quoting his own diary entries: First, he gained authority over his own past with an acquired scientific and sexological gaze that was informed by and often made use of Victorian ideas with reference to

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<sup>244</sup> Schmidt, “Easter Parade,” 247.

<sup>245</sup> Katz, “Invention of Heterosexuality,” 85.

<sup>246</sup> Before New York was nicknamed ‘the city that never sleeps,’ it was the Bowery in New York that never slept. Jacob A. Riis, *Out of Mulberry Street* (New York: The Century Co., 1898), 108.

<sup>247</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 109.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

gender and sexuality. Secondly, he distinguished himself from “the atavic classes,”<sup>250</sup> from his “bosom friends prostitutes, fairies, burglars, gunmen,”<sup>251</sup> whom he later claimed to only have taken to because “Mother Nature caused me.”<sup>252</sup> With his passion for religious and missionary work as well as the continuing self-description as a religious prodigy, he still related to a Christian ideal of morality. But, as one reviewer of *Autobiography* makes abundantly clear, religiosity without Christian morals and decency was perceived as insanity: “To psychiatrists this is no novel thing – to find religious mania early among a number of insane types.”<sup>253</sup> Another reviewer presents *Autobiography* as medical literature for the “well-balanced, technical mind,”<sup>254</sup> which would accomplish its purpose if it helped “relieve society from the incubus of an everpresent, overwhelming disaster from sex inversion.”<sup>255</sup> J.C. Rommel, associate editor of *The Medical World*, makes no mention of Werther’s religiosity in his review, but perceives *Autobiography* to be a “very interesting account of [...] his psychological state at various epochs and periods of life.”<sup>256</sup> Rommel further suggests taking into account Werther’s “classification of human beings [...] which we would do well to use to classify our patients. We all have come across persons said to be queer on account of some particular thing.”<sup>257</sup> The publication of all of these reviews fell into a significantly different time from the period in which Werther wrote the diary entries he later included in his *Autobiography*. The medical profession and its sub-branch sexology had undergone considerable transformation since Werther’s confessional diary entries of the 1880s and 1890s. After more than eighteen years of fighting for the publication of his works, Werther published *Autobiography* in 1918. Physicians reviewed it and in some cases – as is evident in Rommel’s review – acknowledged its scientific approach. In other words, sexology superseded the authority of the Christian pastoral to a certain degree. The general standard of the Christian pastoral to speak relentlessly about sexuality was still in place, albeit in a different discursive system as Michel Foucault posits: “The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex.”<sup>258</sup> Werther’s diary entries are emblematic of this discursive shift from religious to medical discourse. This

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<sup>250</sup> Ralph Werther, *The Riddle of the Underworld*, in: Victor Robinson Papers 1898–1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28, 6.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Isadore Dyer, “Review of *Autobiography*,” *The New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, LXXI, (1919): 527.

<sup>254</sup> Sarah M. Hobson, “Review of *Autobiography*,” *The Journal of the American Institute of Homeopathy*, March (1919): 1072–73.

<sup>255</sup> Hobson, “Review of *Autobiography*,” 1073.

<sup>256</sup> J.C. Rommel, “Review of *Autobiography*,” *The Medical World*, June (1919): 238.

<sup>257</sup> Rommel, “Review of *Autobiography*,” 238.

<sup>258</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*, 238.

probably was one of the reasons why Herzog, Werther's editor, made no changes to the final draft of *Autobiography* and its diary entries, as the diary entries provided short confessions, and, though ostensibly from another time period, fit neatly into the new confessional structure of sexological case studies. It is hard to say if Herzog even noticed the diary entries, because in his "opinion the book had neither literary nor scientific value."<sup>259</sup> It is however true that Herzog "offered [*Autobiography*] as a psychological study, well worthy of a careful analysis."<sup>260</sup> It was indeed a lengthy case study.

In his teens in the 1880s, Werther wrote that he "developed into a religious prodigy, leading the congregation in church."<sup>261</sup> The former morbid and suicidal thoughts, caused by his non-normative gender and sexual desire, he claims, were stopped through the Christian ministry and his field of work, so that he now considered his yearning for fellatio a "besetting sin" that he fought "until the age of nineteen."<sup>262</sup> He fought it by writing and confessing these sins to a diary, a practice he continued for the next decades. On a family visit in his first year of college, he describes himself as "supersensitive to my family's criticism of my lack of manliness."<sup>263</sup> Werther mentions that he therefore shunned all social gatherings and retreated to the practice of writing a diary.<sup>264</sup> He already knows that "love and courtship in my case must be with one of my own physical sex,"<sup>265</sup> yet this realization is still deeply troubling to the Werther of 1891, the year he moved to New York City. He cites from his diary in *Autobiography*:

Religion, reputation, life itself, ready to put all at stake for a few moments enjoyment. [...] If only I had thought more of the love of Christ to me, I might not have so far yielded! For a month been in close communion with God; yet in a moment I can so fall away! [...] I feel this morning that I can never enter the ministry.<sup>266</sup>

Werther writings are an eclectic mixture of frequently cited short diary entries, sexological quotations, poems, and letters. When Werther encountered a physician that considered him an exceptional case, his idea to write an autobiography was born.<sup>267</sup> Keeping a diary, with the prospect of publishing an autobiography one day, became a possibility by the physician's authority. There are no rules or formal requirements for writing an autobiography

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<sup>259</sup> Herzog, introduction, 15.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>261</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 48.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid. In the *Female Impersonators* he praises his "personal faith in Christian doctrine, and my habit, instilled in infancy, of 'taking everything to God in prayer,' have saved me from suicide a thousand times and made the deepest of sorrows tolerable." He planned to write another book titled "*My Spiritual Autobiography*." Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 73.

<sup>263</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 50.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 17, FN 102.

as James Olney posits, “no necessary models, no obligatory observances gradually shaped out of a long developing tradition and imposed by that tradition on the individual talent who would translate a life into writing.”<sup>268</sup> It was therefore not only possible for Werther to become a medical case; he moreover had the opportunity, and skills, to translate his life into writing. The circumstances of Werther’s writing, however, made it more than a translation of life into writing. Writing was what made life intelligible for him, and was only later followed by his missionary approach of informing society of the lives of androgynes in general. Writing an autobiography was not too far removed from what he had done since his early teens, and it indeed was his writing of the self. The Christian narrative – however – was here to stay.

In his first two years in New York City, Werther wrote about the missionary work he did “in the slums as an avocation,”<sup>269</sup> preaching “from the pulpit, besides being the leader of about a hundred secondary church services.”<sup>270</sup> The diary entries in *Autobiography* are filled with the frequent discussion of sins that he may have committed, asking himself what “harm may I not have brought on Christ’s cause by my recent action”<sup>271</sup> – referring in this instance to the amorous thoughts and temptations Werther faced when an old schoolmate called and asked to stay overnight.<sup>272</sup> Werther confessed his sins in his diaries. In this sense, it was not the obligation to “admit to violations of the laws of sex, as required by traditional penance,”<sup>273</sup> that he and his editor openly wrote against,<sup>274</sup> “but [...] the nearly infinite task of telling – telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex.”<sup>275</sup> Werther did not speak to anyone about his thoughts and feelings,<sup>276</sup> as they interfered with his highest ideal, which was “to be a Christian philosopher, and to preach the Gospel to those who are living in sin and sorrow. An amorous person can hardly be a philosopher, a scholar, and a preacher.”<sup>277</sup> This did not change when he gathered “first knowledge of other adult inverts”<sup>278</sup> in New York within his circle of university

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<sup>268</sup> James Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>269</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 49.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>273</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*, 20.

<sup>274</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 9; Werther, *The Female Impersonators*, 123, 138, 191, 262.

<sup>275</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*, 20.

<sup>276</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 7.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 54.

colleagues. In a conversation, he overheard four students who were “cursed as I am, ‘With their procreative instincts centered in their heads instead of in the usual organs,’”<sup>279</sup> as one of the students put it.<sup>280</sup> The ruminations in his diaries are accompanied by intense readings of “all the passages of sacred scripture bearing on the case,” leading him to “finally [...] determine to fight harder than ever to annihilate in [himself] all the movings of the sexual nature [...]”: “In the following weeks, I occasionally did not leave my room all day, fasting, praying, and studying the scriptures.”<sup>281</sup> These religious self-negotiations are followed by further passages on “unwilling desires,” “delirious imaginations,” “nights of deprived sleep;” finally superseded by his first transformation “into a sort of secondary personality inhabiting the same corpus as my proper self, to which personality I soon gave the name of ‘Jennie June.’”<sup>282</sup>

### 3.3. Sexological writing: “A plain chronological statement of facts”

Werther’s path into sexological research was preceded by and rooted in the paradoxical situation he found himself in as a devout and religious, yet gender and sexual non-conforming person. We have seen how the confessional writing of the 1890s led up to the female impersonation persona of Jennie June because the “utmost recourse to religion”<sup>283</sup> was futile and unable to change anything regarding his desires and self-perception. Around the same time, he mentions his “recourse to medical professors.”<sup>284</sup> In hopes of relief, Werther began seeing several physicians. The first physician he sought help from was the family physician who recommended entering “into courtship with some girl acquaintance”<sup>285</sup> which “would render me normal.”<sup>286</sup> Further, he met Dr. Prince Albert Morrow who was responsible for starting “a movement in this country in the organization of a society for ‘Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis’”<sup>287</sup> – a society devoted to “sex hygiene.”<sup>288</sup> Morrow had close ties to a couple of reform groups<sup>289</sup> and advised Werther “that either castration or marriage would be a sure cure

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<sup>279</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 55.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Howard A. Kelly and Walter L. Burrage, *American Medical Biographies* (Baltimore: The Norman Remington Company, 1920), 822.

<sup>288</sup> Kelly, *American Medical Biographies*, 822.

<sup>289</sup> He was proofreader and advisor for Edwin R. A. Seligman’s final report under the direction of The Committee of Fifteen in 1900 titled *The Social Evil, With Special Reference to Conditions Existing in the City of New York* (New York 1900). The Committee of Fifteen was a New York City citizens’ group that advocated the elimination of vice (specifically prostitution and gambling). It was founded in November 1900. Its members

for [his] abnormal passion!”<sup>290</sup> Another physician Werther consulted was Dr. Robert Safford Newton, professor of diseases of the eye, throat and skin in the Eclectic Medical College, and editor of the *New York Quarterly Journal* and the *New York Medical Eclectic Journal*.<sup>291</sup> Newton advised drugs and electrical stimulation of the brain and spinal cord. Hypnotism was tried as well, which after several months of treatments rendered Werther “almost a physical and nervous wreck.”<sup>292</sup> In *Riddle of the Underworld*, Werther describes his visits to Morrow and Newton, pleading “that they make a genuine man out of [him].” In *Autobiography*, as in all other texts, Werther expresses his utmost discontent with the medical profession and the treatments he received at that time: “How many inverters have followed such advice of a physician, and seeking a cure in marriage, have been plunged into insanity or suicide, either on the eve of marriage, or soon after!”<sup>293</sup> In *Riddle of the Underworld*, Werther writes that “[i]n 1893 [he] finally concluded that medical science was helpless in the matter of rescuing [him] from the hands of Destiny.”<sup>294</sup> Despite, or possibly because of these experiences, Werther continued to gather medical information and to consult with physicians over the following couple of years. He understood the burgeoning field of medical sexology as a viable way to reconcile his masculine and feminine identities.

Christianity has broadly been shown to have been one of the most powerful forces in regard to sexuality until the 1870s and 1880s, at which point the medical profession began to slowly gain authority over matters of sexuality and sexual conduct. However, notions of decent moral conduct were all but absent in sexological thought. Before sexology “could explain inversion authoritatively, it had to demonstrate that inversion was symptomatic of a disease, and thus a matter properly in the domain of medicine, rather than of religion or the law.”<sup>295</sup> At the end of the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s, a few sexologists were among those who would render inversion as a disease to be treated by scientists. The English translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) as well as the works of George Miller Beard, G. Frank Lydston, and James Kiernan propelled medical models of homosexuality in the USA and thereby helped to gain the authority needed to deal with what

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were mostly prominent businessmen. They hired a team of investigators who visited locations throughout the city where ‘vice’ crimes allegedly took place, filing reports on each side.

<sup>290</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 68.

<sup>291</sup> Kelly, *American Medical Biographies*, 822.

<sup>292</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 68.

<sup>293</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 68.

<sup>294</sup> Ralph Werther, *The Riddle of the Underworld*, in: Victor Robinson Papers 1898-1947, Modern Manuscripts Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD; MS C 28, p. 18.

<sup>295</sup> Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” 129.



these physicians called sexual invert<sup>296</sup> Beard was a lecturer on nervous diseases at the University of New York, a physician of nervous disorders to the Demilt Dispensary and a member of the New York County Medical Society. Renowned for having “carried the evolution theory into the study of insanity and all functional diseases of the nervous system,”<sup>297</sup> he was also the first American physician to do research in electro-therapeutics, “which naturally led to the study of psychology.”<sup>298</sup> By way of his descriptions of neurasthenia or *American Nervousness*, Beard was one of the world’s most influential physicians and an important figure in the study of ‘sexual neurasthenia,’ or “sexual exhaustion,” differentiating it from “hysteria, simple hypochondria, insanity, and various organic diseases of the nervous system.”<sup>299</sup> In his posthumously published *Sexual Neurasthenia*, references to a Christian ideal of morality and decency abound. According to Beard, the combination of hysteria and neurasthenia led to symptoms of moral decline in patients.

Beard distinguished between sexual perversion as an acquired condition and as an inherited possession. In the 1880s, this was still seen as a new form of reasoning; an argument that “resonated with the two main currents in Continental psychiatric thought – acquired and congenital causes of mental illness and inappropriate behaviors, which focused in turn upon psychological aspects and neurological and physical defects of the patients.”<sup>300</sup> Beard and Krafft-Ebing were among the physicians whose theories Werther would later partially adopt. In the 1880s, Beard wrote that when a person’s “sex is perverted, they hate the opposite sex and love their own; men become women and women men, in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings and behavior.”<sup>301</sup> Moral conduct was still one of the key narratives in classifying socially acceptable sexual behaviors and gendered identities.<sup>302</sup> Christian narratives of morality and decency had an influence on medical and juridical discourses, considered an antidote for psycho-sexual degeneration. For the religious self-identified androgyne Werther, whose behavior was non-conforming to prevalent ideas of gender and sexuality, these narratives were difficult to resist.

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<sup>296</sup> James G. Kiernan, “Sexual Perversion and the Whitechapel Murders,” in *Medical Standard* 4 (1888): 170–172; George Frank Lydston, “Sexual Perversion, Satyriasis and Nymphomania,” in *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 61 (1889): 253–258; George M. Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia, Its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment with a Chapter on Diet for the Nervous* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1884)

<sup>297</sup> Kelly, *American Medical Biographies*, 81–82.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ivan Crozier, introduction to, *Sexual Inversion, A Critical Edition*, by Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 19.

<sup>301</sup> George M. Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia*.

<sup>302</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1894), 15, 53, 55, 56, 75, 141, 235, 249, 382, 391. According to Krafft-Ebing various illnesses were caused by defective moral conduct.

It was nevertheless the medical profession with its sub-branch sexology that offered Werther recourse from being moralized as a sinful person. It offered strategies to naturalize his self-perception as part of “Nature’s Step-Children – the sexually abnormal by birth.”<sup>303</sup> Both of Werther’s published books were preceded by this quote from *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Charles Gilbert Chaddock, the American translator of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, attributed the invention of the term “Nature’s Step-Children”<sup>304</sup> to Krafft-Ebing. But it was not in fact Krafft-Ebing who came up with the term. One of Krafft-Ebing’s case study patients, a 37-year-old man, used this term as a self-description in *Psychopathia Sexualis*: “Innumerable times I have puzzled my brain to know whether science, or any of her free and unprejudiced devotees, could think of any way in which to give us step-children of Nature a more endurable position before the law and mankind.”<sup>305</sup> In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing undertook a categorization of sexual behaviors through a number of clinical case studies. The 37-year-old man was case number 122, categorized under the sub-heading “Effemination and Viraginity.” The sexual behaviors categorized as such included cross-gender identifications, and it possibly hit close to home when the similarly afflicted Werther read the *Psychopathia* for the first time in 1896, stumbling upon the case of the 37-year-old man as someone he could identify with. In Krafft-Ebing’s patient’s account, introspective and missionary writing is as prevalent as it is in Werther’s texts: “I write, as well as I can, the history of my suffering, actuated only by the desire, by this autobiography, to clear up to some extent the misunderstanding and errors concerning ‘contrary sexual instinct’ which are still so widely prevalent.”<sup>306</sup> The medical naturalization of sexuality and gender as part of the differentiation and categorization of identities led to a paradoxical situation queer persons would encounter more often in the decades to come. Jeffrey Weeks suggests that the “medical model of homosexuality”<sup>307</sup> replaced the religious model at the end of the nineteenth century, characterizing homosexuality as the condition of certain, identifiable individuals rather than a form of sinful behavior in which anyone might engage. It became a possibility for Werther, a way of rearranging his perceived sinful behavior into another system of knowledge, that of the medical profession – which itself emancipated from religious codes of moral conduct in the 1890s by slowly gaining authority over perceptions of normal gender and sexual behavior. The New York Medico-Legal Society, established in 1866 for the advancement of the Science of Medical Jurisprudence, was a key factor in professionalizing the medical profession in late-

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<sup>303</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 6.

<sup>304</sup> Charles Gilbert Chaddock, introduction to *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1894), VIII.

<sup>305</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 293.

<sup>306</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 290.

<sup>307</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, “Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present,” (London: Quartet Book, 1977) cited in: Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” 114.

nineteenth-century New York City. It was a network of international lawyers and physicians; its journal – first published in 1884 – a platform to discuss new research ranging from eugenics to neurasthenia. Werther was thus connected to one of the most important institutions that helped shape medical discourse, or, more precisely, one of the foremost institutions to shape the scientific outlook on categorizing and differentiating between normal and abnormal gender behavior and identities.

Yet it was more than a medical model of homosexuality replacing the religious one that took place at the end of the nineteenth century. First, Werther and his androgyne and fairy friends, were not only interested in same-sex sexuality. It was an interest and desire that far surpassed sexuality. Placing Werther's writing and the account of his life within a history of homosexuality is possible, and it has rightly been done in the 1970s. And yet, as several historians and literary scholars have pointed out, it is clearly much more complicated. To do justice to the historical figure Werther and his social environment is to acknowledge other categories of social stratification that come to the forefront when focusing on the practice of writing, such as class, religion, race, gender, age and issues of (dis-)ability. Secondly, with Werther's writings one has to acknowledge the unique trajectory of emancipation from religious codes of moral conduct by way of the incorporation of the legal system into what Weeks calls the medical model. Here, New York City played an important role, because it was here that the Medico-Legal Society was established in 1866. This was one of the few places where Werther had the possibility not only to publish, but where he apparently also gained employment. Despite being (self-)labeled as an effeminate man, Werther's employer "[t]he great lawyer[,] never evidenced a suspicion that I was myself an androgyne...."<sup>308</sup> The unnamed great lawyer in *Riddle of the Underworld* manuscript was Clark Bell, the first and long-lasting editor of the *Medico-Legal Journal* from 1884 to 1916, who employed Werther "at the very height of [his] fairie career."<sup>309</sup> For Werther, this height came at the age of twenty-five, "after which it gradually declined."<sup>310</sup> If this holds true, Werther would have already been an employee of the *Medico-Legal Journal* in 1899, the year in which his first draft of *Autobiography* was finished. The medical knowledge he acquired in the 1890s not

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<sup>308</sup> Werther, *Riddle*, 12.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 165: Werther describes the declining instinct of androgynes "to dress and pose as a mademoiselle" when reaching the mid-thirties, as "[a]ge sobers many and they become practically asexual." Not only the conflation of sex and gender in this passage is striking, but also that he claims to have "observed the same thing in ultra-virile men" and that their "craze of the opposite sex is strongest from twenty to twenty-five [...] after which it gradually declines." Werther's further argument is that "[i]t is the same with animals": By invoking a (dis-)similarity with animal kingdom, Werther again naturalizes his observations, very much in the vein of contemporary sexology which employed dissimilarity and similarity according to what was helpful for the argumentation at hand.

only attests to his disavowal of religious conduct and the medical expertise of effeminate men; he in fact became employed as a legal clerk and thus came in direct contact with the medical professionals that thought about the medical-legal implications of gender non-confirming persons such as himself.

One of the most frequently used topoi of sexological writing was the inclusion of well-known historical figures into studies dealing with non-normative genders and sexualities. It served to authoritatively align sexual conduct with behavioral modes of a predominantly literate class. Werther for example mentions Socrates, Plato, Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, and Walt Whitman among others in the chapter on *Androgynes of Mythology and History*<sup>311</sup> in *The Female Impersonators*. The first pages of *Autobiography* also feature references to historical and fictional figures. Werther not only thinks of them as androgynes – what is more is that all of these figures also are writers.<sup>312</sup> He intertwines their life-accounts with his, creating a historical lineage for himself because “we androgynes, who for two thousand years have been despised, hunted down, and crushed under the heel of normal men because they have misunderstood biblical condemnations of homosexuality, have no reason to be ashamed of our heritage.”<sup>313</sup> Werther claims the benefits to society and the cultural progress made by these prominent historical and cultural icons: They “ALL WERE ANDROGYNES,”<sup>314</sup> he informs the reader in capital letters, contrasting it from the rest of the text. What is perhaps at the core of Werther’s androgyne lineage is the importance he saw in the fact of androgynes having a past, a history invisible to the professional readership he was addressing, and a history that he himself had become a part of in the meantime. By writing about his own experiences and comparing them with those eminent men, he at least challenges other sexologists’ narratives. Renowned sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, whose entire project’s underlying assumption was “that any departure from procreative heterosexual intercourse represents a form of emotional or physical disease,”<sup>315</sup> were less interested in a narrative of eminent men as androgynes *and* beneficiaries to society. Krafft-Ebing assumes the existence of complementary, yet widely separated histories within a unifying history that “makes continuous progress,”<sup>316</sup> and wherein “Christianity is one of the most powerful of the forces favoring moral progress.”<sup>317</sup> He denounces the “sodomitic

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<sup>311</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 25–38.

<sup>312</sup> See for example: “Francis Bacon published extensively under his own name [...] Just as the present writer has quite a number of publications under his legal name, and a number under the name Ralph Werther – Jennie June.” Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 35.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 36, FN 1.

<sup>315</sup> Stryker, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 21.

<sup>316</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 6. [Most likely the edition Werther knew].

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

worship of the gods,”<sup>318</sup> which, “in the life of the people, and in the laws and religious practices, existed among the ancient Greeks, – to say nothing of the worship of Phallus and Priapus among the Athenians and Babylonians, of the bacchanals of ancient Rome,”<sup>319</sup> and describes these “[p]eriods of moral decadence in the life of a people”<sup>320</sup> as “always contemporaneous with times of effeminacy, sensuality, and luxury.”<sup>321</sup> It is necessary to retrace these arguments from the seminal *Psychopathia Sexualis*, because Werther was aware of Krafft-Ebing’s studies and engaged in an intellectual and scientific debate with an influential sexologist, not only by adapting a quasi-sexological mode of writing.<sup>322</sup> He made a case study of himself by acquiring medical knowledge of non-normative sexualities and genders, and putting this knowledge into context by writing his own story and that of other acquainted androgynes and female impersonators.

Krafft-Ebing, around the same time that Werther writes about his troubles in the diaries, describes the medical ability to challenge non-normative genders and sexualities as a central task for a flourishing society and state.<sup>323</sup> According to him, effeminacy, sensuality, and luxury align with moral decadence, and thereby enter into the medical discourse claiming authority over perceptions of sexuality and gender.<sup>324</sup> Krafft-Ebing diagnoses effeminacy as a condition, which

can only be conceived as occurring with increased demands upon the nervous system, which must meet these requirements. As a result of increase of nervousness, there is increase of sensuality, and, since this leads to excesses among the masses, it undermines the foundation of society, – the morality and purity of family life. When this is destroyed by excesses, unfaithfulness, and luxury, then the destruction of state is inevitably compassed in material, moral and political ruin.<sup>325</sup>

As a warning, he mentions examples of “this character presented by Rome, Greece, and France under Louis XIV and XV”<sup>326</sup> and refers to the works of Ludwig Friedländer, Friedrich Wiedemeister, and Paul Moreau. Werther’s writing on influential and renowned historical androgynes thus not only challenges a binary gender system and a Christian understanding of

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid. Krafft-Ebing refers to various ancient festivals such as the Roman festivals of Bacchus, the Greco-Roman god of wine, freedom, intoxication and ecstasy, based on the Greek Dionysia and the Dionysian mysteries, which arrived in Rome c. 200 BC.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Herring, introduction, XXI: “The most widely read and oft-quoted sex study of its time with over fourteen editions translated into twenty-five languages. Its popularity also established a genre that Werther’s *Autobiography* extends: the pathological case study.”

<sup>323</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>324</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 7.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 6, FN 1: “Comp. Friedlander Sittengeschichte Rome; Wiedemeister, Der Casarenwahnsinn; Suetonius. Moreau, Des aberrations du sens génésique” (sic).

sexuality, but effectively no less than the fabric of state and society altogether. Werther acknowledges Krafft-Ebing in *Autobiography* by bringing up the existence of androgynism, but both Werther and his editor are keen to offer another point of view. As Herzog writes in the concluding remarks to his introduction to *Autobiography*, “the author offers the *Autobiography of an Androgyne* as a plain chronological statement of facts slightly covered to hide his identity” and from which “only one conclusion can be reached: Such as he are not to be punished.”<sup>327</sup>

Werther’s sexual life is an important factor in all of his writings, which is why, as he makes clear, his writing came first, only later in life to be superseded by becoming a female impersonator. But Werther also perceived his sex to differ from the male body. This was as much of a concern for Werther as the sexual desires he describes. He describes his physical and psychical constitution as leaning toward a ‘female’ type as delineated in the first few chapters of *Autobiography*.<sup>328</sup> The first three chapters, entitled “Hermaphroditos,” “Androgyne Defined,” and “Fairie Defined,” are concerned with biologizing gender. The definitions therein range from “the original Greek signification of this term”<sup>329</sup> exemplified by “the classical stature of *Hermaphroditos*, with complete male sexual determinants and no trace of female, but with female secondary determinants,”<sup>330</sup> to “the word androgyne [which] has come into use to denote an individual with male genitals, but whose physical structure otherwise, whose psychical constitution, and *vita sexualis* [...] approach the female type.”<sup>331</sup> While both definitions describe male bodies, it is notable that the second body model makes use of a medical term – coined by Krafft-Ebing, whom Werther cites: “There is yet wanting a sufficient record of cases belonging to this interesting group of women in masculine attire with masculine genitals.”<sup>332</sup> On a micro-analytical level, Werther’s texts showcase what Michel Foucault termed “a new *specification of individuals*.”<sup>333</sup> Whereas sodomy, “as defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes,”<sup>334</sup> “was a category of forbidden acts”<sup>335</sup> of which the homosexual was a mere “perpetrator,” homosexuality in the nineteenth century became a categorized entity itself, awarding, among other things, a case history, a past, or a childhood.<sup>336</sup> Foucault here refers to the history of an individual person in which “nothing that

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<sup>327</sup> Herzog, introduction, 16.

<sup>328</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 19.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>333</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality, an Introduction*, 42–3.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.”<sup>337</sup> When Werther arrived in New York City in the early 1890s, this “incorporation of perversion”<sup>338</sup> had just begun in the medical profession of the United States, but according to Chauncey “it would be wrong to assume [...] that doctors created and defined the identities of ‘inverts’ and ‘homosexuals’ at the turn of the century” and “that people uncritically internalized the new medical models, or even that homosexuality emerged as a fully defined category in the medical discourse itself.”<sup>339</sup> Werther was one of the subjects that did not uncritically internalize the new medical models, instead questioning the established scientific approaches regarding sexuality and effeminate men, and adding definitions that had not yet become sexological canon.

With the use of the term ‘fairie,’ his third definition, Werther adds a layer to the notion of homosexuality yet to be introduced to the medical discourse of his contemporaries. Werther

discloses not only the life of an androgyne per se but that of a ‘fairie’ or ‘petite-jesus,’ the life of which rare human ‘sport’ (in the biological sense) your author was apparently also predestined to live out in a way immeasurably more varied than falls to the lot of the ordinary fairie, having had a limited experience in this vocation in Berlin and Paris and other great European cities, in addition to his extensive experience in New York.<sup>340</sup>

As Werther writes, the fairie is part of another world, “widely used in the U.S.A. by those who are in touch with the underworld,”<sup>341</sup> and additionally assumed representative status for people suffering from “the absence of the female of the species.”<sup>342</sup> Werther is aware of his addition to medical discourse: “As the author is one of the first users of the printed word in this derived sense, he has elected to adopt a distinctive spelling.”<sup>343</sup> In contrast to sexologists like Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis or John Addington Symonds, Werther is likely to have been the first layman to appropriate pathographic techniques and medical knowledge and combine them with experiences made in the streets, bars, and clubs of New York City. Nonetheless, Werther was considered a medical case within the medico-legal field around 1900 and a viable point of departure for sexological studies. As becomes plausible when compared to cases like Krafft-Ebing’s 37-year-old man, Werther fit neatly into contemporary sexologists’ case studies. But as Werther wrote a case study about himself and published it under his own alias, his configuration was unprecedented in sexology. His life-accounts were, however, undeniably and specifically of interest to sexological research,

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>339</sup> Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” 115.

<sup>340</sup> Werther, *Autobiography*, 20.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 21.

because, unlike other androgynous persons and female impersonators, Werther was able to combine different knowledge systems ranging from medico-legal extrapolations to the slang and habits of the so-called underworld. Therefore, Werther rendered himself as an intermediary – not just in gendered terms, but also as an intermediary between science and the everyday practices of non-normative genders and sexualities in New York City.

As previously mentioned, Werther regularly quotes diary excerpts in *Autobiography*. Whether or not these refer to real diaries, Werther's self-description presented to the medical professional reader the sorrows of another young Werther – sorrows that could not be contained by a Methodist's life.<sup>344</sup> Instead of cleansing one's soul from sin through a devout and zealous life, Werther wrote about sin's enslaving power. But Werther's diary excerpts are also paired with the manifestations of a vast medical, anthropological, and historical knowledge. He cites renowned sexological experts from the late nineteenth century such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll, and Havelock Ellis. He seizes upon their theories and re-invents their sexological approaches in order to invent an elaborate male-sex scale, which presents, as a new gendered identity, a third sex that he believed himself to belong to. Michel Foucault writes that medical experts adopted the Christian pastoral wherein the subject's duty was to transform all things concerning sexuality into speech. The subject was incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality, which, as can be seen in Werther's writing, did not ultimately put an end to individual agency. To a certain extent, Werther's practice of writing shaped the sayable and doable in itself, thereby realizing several viable identities that were able to navigate within and through religious and medical discourse formations.

*Autobiography* is full of citations of medical experts of Werther's time. After moving to New York City, Werther acquired an in-depth local, national and international knowledge of sexological research. Werther's discontent with the medico-legal situation for androgynes and everyday interactions with them developed a political interest regarding the situation of androgynes, female impersonators, and fairies. The interest Herzog took in Werther was most likely that Werther seemed an exceptional case study: He would go on to pen the seminal *Medical Jurisprudence* (1931), which showed obvious connections to Werther's work. Herzog moreover ends his introduction to *Autobiography* with a clear view on the "plain chronological statement of facts slightly covered to hide [Werther's] identity," writing that

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<sup>344</sup> In April 1919 Werther publishes a brief account of "The Sorrows of Jennie June" in another medical journal – *The American Journal of Urology and Sexology*. The article repeats many of the sorrows he encounters in *Autobiography* as he grows up "as the son of a prosperous village merchant" in rural Connecticut and subsequently moving to New York City. In contrast to *Autobiography* he distances him from his life account by writing in third person.



“such as he was not to be punished.”<sup>345</sup> Both Werther and Herzog worked towards a reform of the legal system that had seen many revisions since the criminal law revision of 1886, but still imprisoned androgynes and fairies in their lifetime and for decades to come. Consequently, Werther was only able to operate by assuming the position of a writer: his key identity, through which he was able to navigate religious and medical discourse formations and to dissociate from the insufficient subject positions available.

#### 4. Conclusion

Werther’s writing can be seen in the tradition of what Ivan Crozier understands as a new strategy in sexological writing, in the sense that Werther, not unlike Ellis and Symonds two decades earlier, “combined the political motivations of homosexual rights activists [...] with a detailed assessment of European and American Sexology.”<sup>346</sup> Werther, and for that matter, his publisher Alfred W. Herzog, were influenced by this “new strategy in sexological writing.”<sup>347</sup> But unlike the work of other sexologists, Werther’s practice of writing was intertwined with an urban exploration of New York City’s working class and immigrant quarters. It was always also an auto-ethnographic account of the New York underworld in which he claimed to have been more successful than in the overworld.<sup>348</sup> The underworld was the place to tell the story of immigration, poverty, slumming, race, riots, criminality, and sexuality, and while it was under surveillance by many social reformers and reform groups, it was an open and unmarked space that allowed effeminate men like Werther to have a more successful career. His sprees in the underworld mirror his self-writing and both of these practices – walking and writing – were intrinsically intertwined with becoming another gender in so far as it incorporated and presented gender processuality. This navigation between and beyond contemporary notions of a two-gendered system not only becomes apparent when Werther declares himself to be one-third man, one-third woman, and one-third child. It becomes even more obvious in his quoting Krafft-Ebing in *Female Impersonators* or the reader’s letter to Perry Lichtenstein: “They [androgynes] are neither man nor woman: a mixture of both; with secondary psychic and physical characteristics of the one as well as the other sex.”<sup>349</sup> Depicting himself as a child, then, was one way for Werther to circumvent turn-of-the-century ideals of men and women, while at the same time reconfirming them. Shaheen’s account rightfully posits that the incongruities of age and gender showcased here require a mid-nineteenth-century

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<sup>345</sup> Herzog, introduction, 16.

<sup>346</sup> Crozier, *Sexual Inversion*, 1.

<sup>347</sup> Crozier, *Sexual Inversion*, 1.

<sup>348</sup> Werther, *Riddle*, 8.

<sup>349</sup> Werther, *Female Impersonators*, 16; Werther, “A Fairie’s Reply to Dr Lichtenstein,” in *Medical Review of Reviews*, 27 (1921), 539.

retrospective “to a moment in the history of sexuality”<sup>350</sup> that “perceived adult women’s disinclination toward sex as an indication of their arrested maturation.”<sup>351</sup> Even though it can be broadened. Focusing on his self-writing practice, Werther becomes a female impersonator with a distinctly male femininity that can be considered more than mere impersonation, demonstrating the ways in which the constructions of masculinity and femininity around 1900 worked. In the face of his fluctuating, inconsistent, and at times unreliable self-writing, he nonetheless acquires – although only for a brief time – an authorial voice for non-normative gender and sexual identities in medico-legal discourse.

We can trace Werther’s changing self-perception diachronically from his supposed-diary-entries-as-confessional to the publication of his second book and the articles in medical journals, which are far more sexological in tone. But throughout his auto-ethnographical explorations, his confessional diaries, and his sexological testimonies, *writing* was the practice that shaped Werther’s understanding of self-identity. The irresolvable internal contradiction already evident in the confessional tone of Werther’s diary entries finally led to the decision to establish a second personality – Jennie June. Neither his faith nor his Methodists congregation could offer what the sexologists offered, which was help for him and others. While the burgeoning sexology in the United States gave him the prospect of becoming a medical case study, his many sobering encounters with physicians encouraged him to appropriate sexological theories that consolidated his religiosity with his perceived gender and sexuality. The medical profession seemed to offer a way out of the dead end he faced as a pious gender and sexual non-normative person. Writing under the pretense of becoming a medical case shaped the possibility of not being perceived as a sinner and not perceiving oneself as immoral. While it is unclear to what extent Werther understood his later self-writing as documentation of a medical case-study in the full sense, the sexological gaze provided him with an alternative mode of self-perception otherwise unavailable. The male authorial persona that this required had been an identity emphasized throughout all of his writing; yet it was continually reconfigured with its female, or child-like, counterparts.

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<sup>350</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 925.

<sup>351</sup> Shaheen, “Strolling through the Slums,” 925.

## Part II

### Self-writing in journalism

#### 1. Introduction

On May 5th 2015 Google's start page presented a little animation in memory of Nellie Bly's 151st birthday. It focused on the same formula that made her *the* most famous journalist at the end of the nineteenth century: The representation of her gender and her constant breaking the rules of middle-class Victorian virtues for women. The short animation first showed an illustrated newspaper with the headline, "The Gentleman's Perspective – The Rules, What Is Proper."<sup>352</sup> The newspaper was then torn by an animated banner ripping through the upper half of it, thereby also tearing the "Gentleman's Perspective" on a metaphorical level. The banner contained the word 'girl' and a couple of animated, colorful illustrations of girls popping up to the left and right of the blinking indicator of her gender in the middle of the same banner. The main theme of the doodle was her record-breaking trip around the world in 72 days in 1889. The little animation was underscored by the lyrics of Karen O. singing a short and catchy song with the recurring lines "someone's got to stand up and tell them what a girl is good for." Bly, so it seems, tends to be remembered as "a headline, not an author"<sup>353</sup> today. In fact, this well-made little celebration of Bly on the start page of the most valuable publicly traded company in the world in many ways resembled the dramatized newspaper coverage *of* and *from* Bly in the late nineteenth century.

Bly burst "like a comet on New York" and was a "dynamic figure" – one knew "that she was destined for frontpage notice," Ishbel Ross wrote in 1936.<sup>354</sup> Ross was partly right except for that it wasn't destiny that put her on the front page, but her own unique self-fashioning through her practice of writing. This self-fashioning was also a self-making that started with the adaption of a name, because it "offered protection as they [women] waded deep into unladylike territory to poke sticks at powerful men."<sup>355</sup> Christened as Elizabeth Jane Cochran in 1864, she got her writer's alias Nellie Bly at her first newspaper, *The Pittsburg*

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<sup>352</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZaSO31M0VA> [January 4, 2017] For the most part the video focused on the 72-day trip around the globe that made her world famous. It also showed Bly "reporting from the trenches," "with the suffragists," "among the starving," "exposing frauds," and "on the scene." The video ends with Bly taking notes.

<sup>353</sup> Jean Marie Lutes, Introduction, in *Nellie Bly Around the World in Seventy-Two Days and other Writings*, ed. Jean Marie Lutes (New York: Penguin Books, 2014) XIII.

<sup>354</sup> Ishbell Ross, *Ladies of the Press* (New York: Arno Press 1936 [1974]), 50.

<sup>355</sup> Kim Todd, "These Women Reporters Went Undercover to Get the Most Important Scoops of Their Day," in *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2016.

*Dispatch*.<sup>356</sup> It was a pseudonym – coming from a minstrelsy song figure – that had been in the American cultural imagination since the mid-nineteenth century. The names of so-called women journalists were often pseudonyms; one of the most famous journalistic aliases was probably Jennie June, according to the *New York Times*, the first American newspaperwoman.<sup>357</sup> As a male editor for the trade publication *The Journalist* wrote, “[m]any of the brightest women frequently disguise their identity, not under one *nome de plume*, but under half a dozen,” which “renders anything like a solid reputation almost impossible.”<sup>358</sup> History proved the male editor right. Nellie Bly gained an enormous reputation and popularity, which reverberates until today — at least in the United States — as seen recently by the Google start page doodle, by shaping her life through and with the moniker Nellie Bly. The self-making of herself is deeply connected to the appropriation of her writers’ alias, and will therefore be analyzed in Chapter 3.1.

From an early age, she adapted the burgeoning sensationalistic headline-driven journalism style of the late nineteenth century and shaped it with her self-writing practice. In the 1880s, journalism was a profession mainly run by men. Women seldom wrote articles, at least not in newspapers.<sup>359</sup> Certainly, so-called women questions were addressed in the newspapers. As a consequence, Bly wrote herself into being by inventing herself as a journalist, as we will see in this chapter. Even though it was George Madden – her first editor at the *Dispatch* – who picked her writer’s alias, it was Bly’s practice of self-writing that appropriated journalism for her own end, and thereby she visualized and realized herself as a journalist in a male-dominated world. This chapter focuses on her self-writing that visualized hidden places and practices in New York City. Google’s start-page animation doubtless featured one of the most notable journalists of the nineteenth century at the expense of reducing her to her record-breaking trip on the one hand, and, in fact, to her subjectivity as a woman, on the other hand.<sup>360</sup> Buried within this reduction lies exactly one of the key outcomes of her practice of writing, to undermine the subjugation of women through the medical gaze. Bly opened a space of possibilities in New York newspapers and other professional fields for women as well. The headline-driven journalism, focusing on records and actions perceived as breaking the gender-boundary as a consequence only at first sight

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<sup>356</sup> In the years Bly worked for the *Dispatch* (1885–1887) the city of Pittsburgh was spelt Pittsburg.

<sup>357</sup> “Mrs. Jennie C. Croly Dead,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1901, 3. Jennie June was Jennie C. Croly, born in England, 1820, and editor at *The Democratic Review*, *The Weekly Illustrated*, *The Home Maker*, and *Godey’s Magazine*.

<sup>358</sup> *The Journalist*, 1889.

<sup>359</sup> *The Journalist*, September 1887, V.6, No.1, 14, republished an article from the *New York Mail and Express* that posits that there were enumerate names of women in the editorial chairs of magazines.

<sup>360</sup> Nellie Bly broke Phileas Fogg’s record for traveling around the world. Phileas Fogg was the protagonist in Jules Verne’s novel *80 Days Around the World*. See Lutes, *Nellie Bly*.

seems reductionist. It is true – it indicates a reinforcement of gender binaries. But at the same time, it offered various possibilities of change, and opened the profession of the newspaper for women in a way not seen before. These changes became possible through the identity that Bly shaped within and through her self-writing.

This chapter will furthermore uncover her practices of writing and focus on how she was able to temporarily (re-)arrange predominant macro-political narratives of gender, race, and class. For this matter, I will take into account a deep description approach based on a variety of sources like letters, articles, reports, and novels. These sources will help to analyze her self-writing practice that formed the basis of her investigation of two male-dominated spaces in New York City: The Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island and the newspaper offices in downtown Manhattan. "Women Journalists" – the last article she wrote as a special correspondent in New York City for the *Dispatch* – will be analyzed in Chapter 3.2. Here she interviewed various newspaper editors in New York City about their views on women as journalists. With the two asylum articles, as examined in Chapters 3.3 and 3.4, in contrast, she uncovered barely known medical practices and made them visible to a broad public by publishing them in the *New York World* in October 1887. I will analyze the two articles about her trip into the infamous insane asylum because here she feigned insanity and wrote about herself as much as she wrote about the conditions for impoverished mentally ill immigrants. Her impersonation of an insane woman impressively demonstrates the efficacy of her self-writing practice. Bly's preceding article on "Women Journalists" – soon be named girl stunt-reporters – facilitated this trip into the asylum in the first place. In this chapter in general I will therefore uncover the relationship between her self-writing practice in regard to her self-making and –realization as a journalist *and* as a woman in New York City. This chapter thus focuses on her first two *World* articles, and her last article for the *Dispatch*, reports by semi-public institutions like the Department of Public Charities and Corrections, the United States Department of the Interior, correspondences, court testimonials, and other newspaper articles about and by Bly.

Bly was the key figure in a short-lived journalistic way of generating information called stunt reporting.<sup>361</sup> While her influence on journalism in general can hardly be underestimated, no major biography existed until 1994. Brooke Kroeger published the meticulously

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<sup>361</sup> Similar to many other scholars, Brooke Kroeger understands stunt or detective journalism as the predecessor to investigative reporting. Lutes argued that this has helped to obscure a national public venue for women's voices, created by female journalists with and within stunt reporting that was able to produce a dual role in which women acted simultaneously as both objects and agents. Jean Marie Lutes, "Into the Madhouse with Nellie Bly: Girl Stunt Reporting in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 54.2 (2002): 219.

researched book *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*.<sup>362</sup> Bly gained celebrity status as a journalist in the late nineteenth century. She was the topic of a massive array of children's books, games, and photo books. The national and international headlines she made in her lifetime did not wane after her death in 1922. But despite the still ongoing and wide-ranging interest in her person, historical scholarship on Bly still remains scarce. Analyzing her unique self-writing practice will thus focus on a two-fold research gap. The importance of her self-writing practice for the burgeoning professionalization of journalism on the one hand and for the history of subjectivity on the other hand. Although there were a few biographies on Bly before 1994, the majority were addressed to children and juvenile readers. Most of these biographies could not even agree on basic facts of her life until Kroeger uncovered and gathered a massive array of sources by and about Bly.<sup>363</sup> Most of the research done until today focuses on what Kroeger called the "same anorexic body of sources."<sup>364</sup> For this reason, scholarship on Bly itself lingered between fictionality and factual accuracy for decades, as much as her own writing used fictional terminologies and narratives for her journalistic endeavors. Therefore, this chapter will investigate the fictionality of her writers' aliases in depth, as well as a few writing techniques borrowed from fictional writing. In this way, Bly uncovered the practices of mesmerists, servants, midwives, stage actresses, prisoners, detectives, and tenants, to name only a few key subjects she wrote about for the *World* between 1887 and 1894. She wrote about practices hidden from view. As a consequence, she was contemporarily and historically understood as a girl stunt-reporter. Uncovering the secrets of the city, many readers understood her articles as fantastic tales, which nonetheless shaped the realities and understandings of these places. One of these places where practices and peoples were hidden from view was the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. Another place that is of interest for her self-writing practice are the newspaper offices in New York City's Park Row. Both places are also intertwined with and shaped by her experience in the neighboring country of Mexico, to which she made a trip in 1886 for the *Dispatch*.

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<sup>362</sup> Brooke Kroeger, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (New York: Times Books, 1994). In 1994, Kroeger was baffled that Bly's life had not led to more historical research over the years. This stands true until today. She assumed that this was due to the few sources available at that time, besides the many newspaper writings. There were only seven letters by Bly in 1994 when Kroeger started her research. She gathered a collection of 130 letters, court testimonies, military intelligence records, census records, and memories by her colleagues, and talked to several people that expressed serious interest in Bly. I am indebted to her research and her generous help in pointing out the Research Department of State Library of Pennsylvania for additional sources. I used many of the primary sources cited in her biography.

<sup>363</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, XV.

<sup>364</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, XVI.

Indeed, this concurrence between the vivid exchange and transformation of what was perceived as real and fictional turned fiction into fact, as Karen Roggenkamp posits, when she embarked on her trip around the world on November 14, 1889.<sup>365</sup> It brought her, and *The World*, to center stage and would become “one of the most widely discussed expressions of new journalism and set the stage to dramatize an explicit competition between literature and journalism.”<sup>366</sup> She bested the fictional travel record of Jules Verne’s hero Phileas Fogg and circumnavigated the world in 72 days. This travel stunt transformed her into an American icon.<sup>367</sup> Nonetheless, she had shaped her self-writing practice before this record-breaking and highly publicized trip around the world. In various articles for the *Dispatch* and for the *World*, and especially with her two asylum articles, she invented the writer’s persona Nellie Bly, which made it possible to travel the world in the first place. Therefore, the main focus of this chapter is laid upon her articles preceding her journey around the world. In particular, with her two articles about the Women’s Lunatic Asylum it is furthermore to uncover the interdependence on the discursive medico-legal formations and identities and subjectivities shaped within these formations to the burgeoning mass-press sector and its new way of making news at the end of the nineteenth century.

The contemporary representation of Bly in this ongoing serial about her trip around the world was the exact same iconic picture of her that she used to her own ends. This propelled her journalistic fame, and Google used this narrative prominently in its start-page animation in 2015. Bly traveled around the world, but there were other women who traveled the world. In 1889 the guidebook *Hints to Lady Travellers* was published, which indicates a burgeoning interest in traveling as a woman.<sup>368</sup> But, by contrast to other travelers, as Karen Roggenkamp posits, Bly’s “race around the world and against time would become a race against the very idea of fictionality as well”<sup>369</sup> and thereby surpassed “the thrill of the novel, because it would be real.”<sup>370</sup> To repeat, this “race against the very idea of fictionality” was established in her preceding writings, it was – as I argue – Bly’s race against the idea of the fictionality of gender. Before Bly could travel the world as a so-called woman journalist, or girl stunt-reporter, she had to circumnavigate the territories of gender, race, and class, and delve into unknown sectors in the city of New York. This can be best seen in her article “Woman

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<sup>365</sup> Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News, New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction* (Kent: The Kent State University Press 2005), 26.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> With a single bag and unchaperoned she set out to circumnavigate the globe in November 1889. The *World* mentioned her trip in every edition until she came back in early 1890. It was published in four installments and later reprinted as a book. See Lutes, *Nellie Bly*, 142.

<sup>368</sup> Lillias Campbell Davidson, *Hints to Lady Travellers at Home and Abroad* (London: Illiffe & Son, 1889).

<sup>369</sup> Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, 25.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

Journalists” and the two articles about the Women’s Lunatic Asylum, but also earlier – as early as when she adapted her writer’s name Nellie Bly in the first place. Although there were no novels about Blackwell’s Island Women’s Lunatic Asylum, asylum and prison literature in the United States in general was a focus of interest to social reformers, novelists, journalists, and physicians alike.<sup>371</sup> Patients, who were often perceived as inmates in asylums were – much like the asylums themselves – mostly hidden from public view. Their voices, their living conditions, and their everyday lives were part of the imagination of the above-mentioned professional groups for a long time. But Bly’s approach of “going insane,” of impersonating an “insane girl” and deceiving these groups, translated the realities of incarcerated women for a broad public, as few other accounts on asylums did before. Ultimately this led to a change in conditions within the asylum and exposed the realities of women who were often poor working-class immigrants, within New York City.

More than twenty years after the first in-depth historical research by Kroeger, who tried to eliminate all “factoids,” it remains puzzling why Bly still continues to be mostly an obscure figure in historical scholarship. While the burgeoning professionalization of the medical profession in New York City shaped the perception and treatment of women, Bly invented a counter-narrative anchored and told through the representation of her body, as we will see in this chapter. Both professional groups, physicians and journalists alike, shaped the representations of women by writing about women. However, Bly as a young journalist herself wrote a firsthand account of the living conditions at the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island in a way that readers could relate to. The three articles *Behind Asylum Bars* and *Inside the Madhouse* – and the preceding *Women Journalists* – will be the main sources for this analysis of her practice of writing, because in these articles, the relationship between self-fashioning as a woman in journalism and a medico-legal discourse formation at the end of the nineteenth century can be excavated. I will show how the fictional qualities of the categories of race, class, gender, and age in her self-writing practice were intertwined. For instance, to gain entry into the asylum she took up yet another fictional identity, the one of Nellie Brown, an unemployed Cuban. As a consequence, this chapter puts into question how her self-writing practice relied on various (dis-)identification processes. Bly was one of the key figures for investigative reporting at the end of the nineteenth century, but this chapter moreover focuses on her as a stunt-reporter’s figuration that invoked “inherent whiteness, purity, and respectability of their own bodies – presented as inviolate against all odds – to

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<sup>371</sup> Howard Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 124. As Franklin posits, fictional and actual narratives of the lives of criminals made their appearance along with colonialism and large-scale mercantile capitalism as early as in the sixteenth century, and have been an integral part of the culture of capitalist society ever since.



differentiate them from the people they were impersonating.”<sup>372</sup> This was the case with her first stunt-reporting piece she did for *The World* in 1887, when she imitated what the medical profession understood as a hysterical woman’s body, told through the aforementioned personification of an immigrant woman. In an auto-ethnographical account the self-fictionalized journalist adopted the persona of an immigrant, wrote about her way through New York City to Blackwell’s Island and into the Women’s Lunatic Asylum to uncover the treatment of the patients therein.

One possible answer to her on-going fame and the almost invisibility of Bly in contemporary research can be found, as I argue, in her practice of self-writing *and* her self-fashioning as a writer by which she concurrently made spaces visible that were normally hidden from the public. Focusing on her self-writing practice with a practice approach it is possible to put into question the macro-historical structures of gender, race, class, and age and the aligning layers of fictionality. Self-fictionalization and fictionalizing others, as in the case of the immigrant woman, were tools by which Bly was able to point out hierarchies and power structures within urban middle-class Victorian understandings of womanhood. She frequently underscored this by (dis-)identifying with contemporary notions of gender and race. Judith Butler described this (dis-)identifying as a “failure of identification [that may be] itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference.”<sup>373</sup> Butler furthermore recognized dis-identification as an experience of misrecognition an “uneasy standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong.”<sup>374</sup> Bly’s self-writing indeed used a specific form of *dis-identification* that rested partly on fictionalizing others and herself, and for this reason mobilized individuals and institutions alike. This indeed was a democratizing act. Therefore, analyzing Bly’s articles within a broader macro-historical context – the burgeoning professionalization of the mass press and the medico-legal discursive field – we can see how Bly formed, reframed and refigured normative understandings of what it meant to be a woman in late-nineteenth-century New York City through her practice of writing.

It is necessary to differentiate between her determinations, or as Maureen Corrigan writes, her “famous moxie,”<sup>375</sup> and her self-writing practice that deliberately utilized fictional elements. It is true that by all accounts Bly can hardly be understood as not having a force of character, but I argue that it was a specific self-writing style in which she wrote her articles

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<sup>372</sup> For an in-depth account on Bly as a leading so-called girl stunt-reporter see Lutes, “Into the Madhouse.”

<sup>373</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (Routledge: New York, 1993), 219.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Maureen Corrigan, “Foreword,” in Lutes, *Nellie Bly*, X.

and four books. This can be best analyzed by putting into question how she invented a narrative of herself at the beginning of her career, as it was in this timeframe – from 1885 to 1887 – where she developed the basics for her subsequent career. It is true that her self-writing practice made her contemporarily famous. But, as popular writers often focused on her gender without contextualizing this to her self-fashioning and macro-historical production of other categories of difference, the historical figure Bly was lost. This can be seen by focusing on a practice theory approach that puts into question a historical perspective on how her self-writing practice, and how in contrast her gender, was reiterated and influenced in various novels and scholarly research alike that focused on Bly in the last 120 years. Therefore, the following chapter will briefly illustrate how the historical figure Bly has been approached.

## 2. Sources – Research Status – Present Day Relevance

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the reappearance of Nellie Bly's writings within scholarly research as well as the production of popular books that shaped Bly into a household name of journalist writing and made her an American icon. Bly's practice of self-writing as we will see in Chapter Three lingered between fiction and reality from early on in her life, even before her career started at the age of 21 and she became a journalist for the *Dispatch*. Looking at the novels that either used her persona as the main character, or sometimes embedded parts of her life into novels like *The Great Gatsby*, one is inclined to analyze her regular reappearance in American culture in relation to the very same self-writing style she used for her articles.<sup>376</sup> Most commonly she is remembered for her investigative journalism and the topics she wrote about. In contrast, I briefly analyze her regular reappearances in American culture as a distinctive actualization of her subjectivity as a woman. In other words, to focus on her sensationalistic approach without contextualizing it within a wider macro-historical frame of writing itself, it is impossible to differentiate between the stories told *about* her – whether in scholarly works or in popular cultural books – and her self-fashioning. The abundance of children's books, novels, and to a lesser degree historical research seems to ask the same question that Corrigan posits: “where did it come from – Bly's famous moxie – a quality that girls even in our post-feminist age struggle to attain and hold on to.”<sup>377</sup>

There are only a few scholars that wrote about Bly, and of those even less gave hints to what I think is part of the answer – the question of fiction and reality in Bly's writings; most prominently Roggenkamp with her article on Bly's travel around the world. Her ongoing fame I think derives its power from her practice of utilizing this still until today unresolved question of where historical facts start and where fiction begins. Additionally, Bly left no substantial written record, no diaries or journals, which is why her reoccurrence is bound to a rather scarce body of sources.<sup>378</sup> This is most likely a further point why some authors wrote accounts of her that itself lingered between fiction and reality. Doubtless she is remembered as a writer that “has remained hard at work rebutting sexist stereotypes and instilling – particularly in her female readers a sense of adventure and possibility” as Maureen Corrigan argued.<sup>379</sup> But, Corrigan addressed Bly as being “hard at work” – as if she would still be alive – when it actually is her writing that remained and is still *doing* the hard work. Following this perception of Bly being still at work is not wrong, but this assessment must also put into focus

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<sup>376</sup> Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur, The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 2002), 179.

<sup>377</sup> Corrigan, “Foreword” X.

<sup>378</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, XVII.

<sup>379</sup> Corrigan, “Foreword” XI.

her specific self-writing style that used various elements of fictional writing, as for example a sensational tone in reporting. These sensationalistic elements – distinctive narrative tools and words – derived its efficacy in fact from fictional literature. By omitting the relationship between fiction and fact, as done in novels, children’s books, or in scholarly research about Bly, her distinctive self-writing practice is hard to decipher. Because it was here in her self-writing practice that it became possible to uncover specific places where women were excluded or incarcerated, as for example the newspaper offices, or the Women’s Lunatic Asylum. The continuing actualization of the historic figure Bly in novels, children’s books, and in scholarly research tends at times to be still puzzled about her life: “there still lurks much mystery about the female force of nature known as Nellie Bly”<sup>380</sup> as Corrigan writes for instance. Before analyzing the intertwinement between the self-writing practice that had to deal with frictions born out of the unresolved contemporary question between fact and fiction, I will shortly turn to how Bly was perceived in popular culture and research.

Bly’s contemporary readers awaited her newest stunts and “she became a household name throughout America, if not the world.”<sup>381</sup> Still, until today, one can see how Bly stands out to be remembered as a “headline, not an author” as pointed out in the introduction with the example of Google’s doodle anniversary in 2015 on their start page. There are more examples that show an ongoing interest in Bly. The first in-depth historical biographer of Bly, Brooke Kroeger announced on her website a “National History Day” reminder, asking the reader if Bly might be “your topic for this year’s National History Day competition?” She posted this message on her homepage because many students and scholars alike still turn to Kroeger when it comes to the project-based contest for students in grades 6 to 12, to promote the study and appreciation of history among students. To channel the overwhelming number of requests she has gotten in recent years, she added the reminder that “great historians inform themselves before they call authors and endeavor to ask questions that the book does not answer.”<sup>382</sup> Interestingly, Corrigan writes about similar requests popping up in her university e-mail, coming from all over the country. She thinks that the interest comes from an *American Experience* documentary about Nellie Bly, in which she appeared as a talking head.<sup>383</sup> The interest in Bly apparently did not wane in over a hundred years until today.

The students requesting information from Corrigan are without exception always female. The interest stems partly from her self-writing practice, in which she constantly

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<sup>380</sup> Corrigan, “Foreword,” X.

<sup>381</sup> Dianne Bragg, “Nellie Bly: Flying in the Face of Tradition,” 265.

<sup>382</sup> Brooke Kroeger, “For National History Day,” <http://brookekroeger.com/for-national-history-day-contestants/> [March 25, 2017].

<sup>383</sup> Corrigan, “Foreword,” VII.

referred to herself as a girl, while reshaping the gendered – and in fact infantilized – category itself. There was no such thing as a boy stunt-reporter at the end of the nineteenth century in New York City. Journalists and editors framed Bly in the late 1880s as a girl stunt-reporter. Many popular authors included and adopted this framing of Bly as a girl stunt-reporter, without bringing into question the gender hierarchy that was embedded in this circumscription of Bly. But, both scholars and novelists also addressed her as having achieved a long-lasting legacy as a forerunner to this group of stunt-journalists. In fact, the categorization as a girl stunt-reporter was indeed one that Bly used in a self-referential notion again and again herself. This gendered terminology can be found in her earliest articles. Bly signed her first reader's letter with "Little Orphan Nellie." She wrote about girls, as for example in "The Girl Puzzle"<sup>384</sup> or "The Girls Who Make Boxes."<sup>385</sup> Here she wrote that if "girls were boys quickly would it be said: start them where they will, they can, if ambitious, win a name and fortune"<sup>386</sup> stating and asking "[g]irls are just as smart, a great deal quicker to learn; why, then, can they not do the same?"<sup>387</sup> Bly sometimes arbitrarily exchanged the word "girls" with "women" in her articles. The attitude towards girls, young women, and older women was often bereft of any consideration of age in late-nineteenth-century New York City. This position was especially prominent in relation to working-class women. Girls, young women, and older women alike were all "defined by the Victorian middle class as more animal than the refined and lady-like middle class."<sup>388</sup> The press as a consequence subsumed women, because "women acting alone without men-folk to protect them were deemed liable to fall."<sup>389</sup> This was a common notion and Bly defied this stance by putting herself into the narrative's center of almost every article by directly channeling the stories through writing about her sensations, feelings, or attitudes. When she became famous for her investigative reports her self-writing practice became almost synonymous with her writer's moniker. She had rendered herself within so-called stunt-journalism as a girl or as a young woman that could act alone and the moniker "Nellie Bly" became a figuration that many readers could relate to.

Referring to girls was nonetheless not completely without reference to childlike practices and habits. Thomas E. Jordan argued that in the late nineteenth century the attitude to children emerged, or changed, through a Victorian middle- and upper-class emphasis on the

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<sup>384</sup> Nellie Bly, "The Girl Puzzle," *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, January 25, 1885, in Lutes, *Nellie Bly*.

<sup>385</sup> Nellie Bly, "The Girls Who Make Boxes," *The New York World*, November 27, 1887, in Lutes, *Nellie Bly*.

<sup>386</sup> Bly "The Girl Puzzle," 6.

<sup>387</sup> Bly "The Girl Puzzle," 6.

<sup>388</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day, Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso Books, 2010), 77.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

role of the family and sanctity of the child.<sup>390</sup> Children's books were part and parcel of this transformational shift towards children. The first "English masterpiece written for children," Lewis Carroll's fantasy *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865 in England and a year later by the New Yorker publishing house D. Appleton & Company signaled a change in books especially conceived for children. Bly's often-used notion of girls and their working conditions therefore offered another layer within Victorian middle-class culture that was interested in young girls. For this reason, Bly's self-referential notion of a girl-stunt reporter, or her frequent reports on working-class girls, was a new notion in the burgeoning mass-press sector in the United States, that she was aware of and utilized for her own needs.

Bly was propelled by what she imagined girls could do if they were given the chance, as she wrote in "The Girl Puzzle." Certainly, it was no wonder that her gender and age-defying articles led to a score of juvenile books in the twentieth century. Kroeger read one of these books when she was ten years old, as she remembered after becoming a mother herself and wanting to share it with her child. While searching for the book in the late 1980s she found out about Bly's near invisibility with only a few exceptions of early biographies and juvenile books. In all, she found a few biographies for young readers from the 1950s, 1970s, and the late 1980s, as Kroeger mentions in her introduction. In the 1950s Iris Noble published the incorrectly titled *Nellie Bly: First Woman Reporter* and there was also Nina Brown Baker's biography *Nellie Bly*. Through a search firm Kroeger became aware of two books from the early 1970s, Mignon Rittenhouse's *The Amazing Nellie Bly* and Jason Mark's *The Story of Nellie Bly*. Her early research on Bly led her to two more extensive juvenile biographies from 1989, Kathy Lynn Emerson's *A Biography of Nellie Bly* and Elizabeth Ehrlich's *Nellie Bly*. These books covered much the same ground, as Kroeger writes, but each one differed in dates, ages, and spellings of important names, including Bly's. In Kroeger's research in the early 1990s she furthermore discovered that all those passing references in journalism histories of sketchy biographical profiles were "derived from the same anorexic body of sources."<sup>391</sup> This she thought had been the key to why "Nellie Bly had been relegated to the fascination of little girls [...] with the limited circulation of those juvenile books."<sup>392</sup> But, more than twenty years have passed since then, and a fascination with Bly is surely to be seen, nonetheless historical research on her is still rather scarce. It is true Bly seems to be still relegated to the fascination of little girls, National History Day inquiries, and Google start pages, but this cannot be solely the fault of a sketchy source situation – one that has certainly

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<sup>390</sup> Thomas E. Jordan, *Victorian Child Savers and Their Culture: A Thematic Evaluation* (Detroit: E. Mellen Press, 1998).

<sup>391</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, XVI.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid. XVII.

improved since Kroeger's research. It more likely hints to similar structural problems in regard to gender hierarchies nowadays as in Bly's time period. For this reason, Nellie Bly is an important figuration – a starting point – that not only enriches the history of journalism, and the history of gender, but even more so the history of subjectivity.

Only one scholarly article takes into account Bly's writing to a certain degree: Jean Marie Lutes' article, "Into the Madhouse with Nellie Bly," which focuses on girl stunt-reporting in the late nineteenth century. She most importantly points out that the girl stunt-reporters were "almost all white, middle-class women"<sup>393</sup> and, moreover how Bly "transformed her own white, middle-class body into a vehicle of publicity that anchored her pursuit of 'the real' in corporeal existence."<sup>394</sup> Lutes shows the significance to the histories of journalism in analyzing the genesis of stunt reporting with Bly's article on the asylum, and subsequently excavates how her successors like Nell Nelson and Viola Roseboro of the *World*, an unknown author only called the 'girl reporter' of the *Chicago Times*, Winifred Black (Annie Laurie) of the *San Francisco Examiner* and Ada Patterson for the *New York American* came to be subsumed as the 'Meg Merrilies' by their editors – robbing them of the self-assertive strategy Bly had with her name recognition.<sup>395</sup> In 1894 the authority of girl stunt-reporters had already waned and the Meg Merrilies stories became a predictable pastiche.<sup>396</sup> Above all Lutes' article shows how categories of difference were negotiated by telling a story through Bly's body that "was accepted as an obvious and uncomplicated source of truth."<sup>397</sup> In contrast the following chapter will excavate how Bly's writing shaped a version of herself – which I call self-writing – and its relationship with the medico-legal discourse formation in the late 1880 in New York City, by furthermore taking into account a broader body of sources before Bly went "into the madhouse."

### 3. Self-writing as a girl-stunt reporter

Nellie Bly arrived in New York City in May 1887, the same year in which her stunt reports about the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island and the investigation into the newspapers editors' offices were published. Although she had already established a credibility and portfolio with the *Dispatch* in Pittsburgh it was anything but easy for her to get into the offices of the *Sun*, the *World*, the *Herald*, the *Tribune*, the *Times*, or the *Mail and*

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<sup>393</sup> Lutes, "Into the Madhouse," 221.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 228.

*Express* to become a New York-based journalist.<sup>398</sup> If one looks into the secondary literature for the timeframe between Bly's arrival in New York City in May 1887 and her start at *The World* at the end of September 1887, scholars agree on her difficulties in securing a job within one of the newspapers. They pointed to the fact that her portfolio meant little to newspaper heads of the city<sup>399</sup> and that she failed to get a job in New York City for months.<sup>400</sup> Moreover, it appears that she only had moderate regional recognition,<sup>401</sup> making it harder to get into the newspaper offices in New York City as an outsider. One early scholar even referred to the lack of looks and cleverness when she went to introduce herself to John A. Cockerill and Joseph Pulitzer, editors of *The World*: She "was not particularly good-looking, nor was she smart."<sup>402</sup> This reading of Bly and her arrival in New York City before she published the first articles in *The World* cannot be maintained after close reading of the sources published about and by Nellie Bly in the said timeframe. In particular the article "Women Journalists" published August 21, 1887 in the *Dispatch* reveals a unique way of writing herself into New York City editor's offices.

The article "Women Journalists" by Bly skillfully invented a narrative that helped her to get into the newspaper offices. Additionally, she certainly already had a reputation as a journalist that helped her to write this article. She had been a journalist for almost two years with the *Dispatch* and had turned into a special correspondent for the *Dispatch* when she moved to New York. The subsequent chapter will thus single out this article as the gateway for her transition from special correspondent for the *Dispatch* to a soon-to-be journalist for the *World*. The next chapter will furthermore take into account a few other articles that were published in the four months she tried to get a job with one of the newspapers in New York City. These articles were published in cities all over the United States, which consequently questions the reading of Bly's arrival in New York City done by scholars so far in regard to her reputation and her name recognition. In other words, if she only had moderate regional recognition as a journalist, why were there almost thirty articles that featured her name in 1887? In addition, can the approximately four months she needed to end up on the payroll of the *World* really be considered a long time for a 22-year-old journalist coming to New York City to find a job with a newspaper in the first place? These questions must be asked

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<sup>398</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 79.

<sup>399</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 79.

<sup>400</sup> Lutes, "Into the Madhouse" XVIII.

<sup>401</sup> Edlie L. Wong, "Around the World and across the Board: Nellie Bly and Geography of Games," in *American Literary Geographies, Spatial Practice and Cultural Production 1500–1900*, ed. Martin Brückner, Hsuan L. Hsu (Newark: University of Delaware Press 2007), 297.

<sup>402</sup> Ishbel Ross, *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider* (New York: Harper 1936), 50.



alongside Bly's invention of a self-fictionalized writer's persona for the *Dispatch* in the two years she wrote for the newspaper from 1885 to 1887. Because, as I argue, these two points, her self-making through her self-writing and her early articles with which she shaped her reputation and renown were closely connected. To a certain degree the very same technique that later shaped the publishing stance of the *World* had already been established by Bly beforehand. As a result, the publishing history of the *World* gained a lot from the self-writing practice Bly added to the newspaper. Another question that waits to be answered in scholarship on Bly is to what extent it was important that Bly took her name from Nelly Bly, a fictionalized slave girl from a minstrel song produced in the mid-nineteenth century? These questions will provide an insight and an introduction into Bly's self-writing practice used in her two articles on the Women's Lunatic Asylum, on which I will focus in the succeeding chapters 3.2 and 3.3. Here, in the two installments on the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island published in the *World* on October 9, 1887 as "Behind Asylum Bars" and a week later on October 16, 1887 as "Inside the Madhouse" her self-writing practice will additionally be analyzed with regard to gendered and racialized power structures at the core of the medico-legal discourse formation of late nineteenth-century New York City.

### 3.1 The free American girl caught between fiction and reality

Nellie Bly made her break into journalism when she sent an enraged reader's letter to the *Dispatch's* editor Madden in response to an article titled "What Girls Are Good For." According to the author Erasmus Wilson, the answer was marriage, motherhood, and obscurity, to which Bly defiantly dissented in her reader's letter. Bly, an avid reader of the *Dispatch*, read Wilson's railings against "those restless dissatisfied females who think they are out of their sphere and go around giving everybody fits for not helping them to find them."<sup>403</sup> Wilson published his anti-feminist stances in a column called "Quiet Observations" in 1885. Another column he later wrote was called "The Women's Sphere," which according to Wilson was "defined and located by a single word – home."<sup>404</sup> The variety of places that women called home in the second half of the nineteenth century in fact included slave cabins, working-class tenements, frontier dugouts, urban settlement and boarding houses.<sup>405</sup> These were not the places Wilson had in mind. His article "What Girls Are Good For" enraged Bly to such an extent that she wrote a reader's letter to the *Dispatch's* editor Madden and signed it as "Lonely Orphan Girl." This letter was never published, but the two men, Wilson and

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<sup>403</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 35.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>405</sup> Amy G. Richter, *At Home in Nineteenth-Century America, A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press 2015).

Madden, were intrigued by the brisk and direct tone of her letter.<sup>406</sup> They put out a search ad in the *Dispatch* offering a favor, which turned out to be Madden asking her to write an article for one of *Dispatch's* columns. It turned out to be the very same “The Woman’s Sphere” column by staunch anti-feminist Wilson.

In Pittsburgh, Bly was soon well known as the new “free American girl” – a popular topic in the *Dispatch*.<sup>407</sup> This image drew upon the emergence of the New Woman trope. She shaped this image through her self-writing in various ways herself, and it most likely suited the sales figures of the *Dispatch*. From the 1880s an optimistic imagining among reformers and radicals in America altered daily life and culture, and with it women’s demands for employment and political rights became visible.<sup>408</sup> The early women’s suffrage movement was only one of these apparent changes, and newspapers like the *Dispatch* might have taken advantage of this burgeoning political and cultural shift by employing a woman.<sup>409</sup> Within this cultural climate the categorization of the New Woman became an increasingly popular topic in European and North American metropolises in the late nineteenth century. The New Woman was described as independent from the choice of emotional or sexual partnerships and from dutiful daughterhood or marriage to men. The emergence of this reference as propelled by Bly in the *Dispatch* thus challenged men’s power on the one hand, but did not change the power imbalance in so far as it changed the newspaper editorial boards’ personal decisions on the other hand. The “newspaper gods of Gotham”<sup>410</sup> as Bly called the newspaper publishers of New York City, as well as the *Dispatch's* editorial board based their staff decisions on a clear preference for men, as we will clearly see later in her article “Women Journalists.”<sup>411</sup>

Bly used the trope of the New Woman, as exemplified by the notion of the “free American girl,” to her needs to get into the newspaper as much as she used it for the advancement of women’s rights in the United States. Her very first reader’s letter to the *Dispatch* already drew upon the theme of women’s emancipation. In her travelogue about Mexico one year later,<sup>412</sup> when the *Dispatch* had already employed her, she furthermore wrote

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<sup>406</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 36.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>408</sup> Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 2.

<sup>409</sup> Elizabeth Wilkinson Wade, penname Bessie Bramble, was enrolled at the *Dispatch* and had been a newspaper columnist for a decade before Bly started working for the *Dispatch*. She anonymously had written as a highly regard music critic before. If Bly was chosen to become the replacement for Wade, or the *Dispatch* just wanted a good writer, it is not safe to say, but it is true that the newspaper offices started to employ women. Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 36.

<sup>410</sup> Nellie Bly, “Women Journalists,” *Pittsburg Dispatch*, Aug. 21, 1887, 9:3.

<sup>411</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:3.

<sup>412</sup> Nellie Bly “Nellie in Mexico,” *The Pittsburg Dispatch*, March 7, 1886, in Lutes, *Nellie Bly*.

about her cross-border journey without a male escort (she was accompanied by her mother). Although not uncommon in the nineteenth century,<sup>413</sup> Patricia D. Netzley explained how women were discouraged from traveling without men unless they went to a “safe, civilized territory”<sup>414</sup> – and most journalists considered Mexico the precise opposite of that.<sup>415</sup> Bly described foreign journalists in Mexico as superficially depicting the “cathedrals, saints, cities and mountains, but never the wonderful things that are right under their eyes daily.”<sup>416</sup> Invoking the journalists’ professionalism, or lack of it, was important in her early articles. With this narrative device, Bly assured her professionalism as a journalist, by letting the readership trust that she saw more than other journalists. In effect, this recourse on her profession *and* the depictions of a cultural other in her texts remained constant references in her later articles. In “Nellie in Mexico,” for example, she wrote about “their [the Mexicans, B.K.] lives [...] as dark as their skins and hair, and [they] are invaded by no hope that through effort their lives may amount to something.”<sup>417</sup> It was not only the depiction of the people, but furthermore an appropriation of their gaze – which was important in her self-fashioning as a journalist.

Bly’s travel story through the “Mexican peoples’ gaze,” thus also forged an identity that invoked notions of belonging, citizenship, and race. For instance, she wrote that the Mexican babies “are always good” and “[t]heir little coal-black eyes gaze out on what is to be their world, in solemn wonder.”<sup>418</sup> Bly thus used the gaze of the Mexicans as a narrative tool in her stories. As a result, she highlighted her identity as an assumed “civilized” and “emancipated” white American woman from the United States.<sup>419</sup> Within her self-writing practice a distinctive nexus of practices can thus be extrapolated. Writing about the “bodily doings and sayings”<sup>420</sup> of the ethnicized other we see that her self-writing was bound to depictions of the actions of other people. It was therefore an early indicator of how Bly used ethnicized images for the sake of altering the perception and representations of women in the United States. Bly’s short article was the starting point for her second book “Six Months in Mexico”

<sup>413</sup> See Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co. 1832)

<sup>414</sup> Patricia D. Netzley, *Encyclopedia of Women’s Travel and Exploration* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 2001). Cited in Joyce E. Kelly, *Excursions into Modernism: Women Writers, Travel and the Body* (London: Ashgate 2016).

<sup>415</sup> As an example of the perception of Mexico as a dangerous country and being “unfit for democracy at this time,” see John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company 1910), 338.

<sup>416</sup> Bly “Nellie in Mexico,” 10.

<sup>417</sup> Bly “Nellie in Mexico,” 10.

<sup>418</sup> Bly “Nellie in Mexico,” 11.

<sup>419</sup> It is furthermore important on another level that the article was published as it was by the *Pittsburg Dispatch*. It was not possible to find out about the editorial process at the *Dispatch* – if Madden or others proofread her articles, or asked for corrections – but it indicates indeed that the notion of the ethnicized other was an important discursive tool.

<sup>420</sup> Theodore R. Schatzki, “Practice mind-ed orders,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* eds. Theodore R. Schatzki et al. (London: Routledge 2001), 56.

published in 1888. Here the notion of her and the Mexicans' gaze reoccurs regularly, as an illustration: "I defied their gaze and showed them that a free American girl can accommodate herself to circumstance without the aid of a man."<sup>421</sup> The usage of the Mexicans' gaze was not always gendered in her travelogue, as seen by the babies' gaze mentioned before, but it in fact clearly referred to the male gaze back home in the United States. Women, as seen through the eyes of Bly, were able to travel on their own and write about the experiences. Through the usage of the "Mexican gaze" Bly's account of the New Woman in this specific case was thus rendered on the plane of national belonging and citizenship, a theme that reoccurred in her later texts as well.

Bly's invocation of an assumed difference to other people helped her to oppose powerful Victorian morals in the United States. It was solely through becoming a journalist in the first place that she broke with what was deemed proper for women in the 1880s. Notions of purity characterized a cult of a 'True Womanhood' certainly took shape in the early nineteenth century,<sup>422</sup> along with an ideal of a family characterized by moral rectitude, piety, and cultivation of the sentiments and domestic harmony.<sup>423</sup> These notions were still having a great influence in the second half of the century, as we will see by following Bly into New York City. Through her reporting for the *Dispatch* Bly unquestionably already had gained a reputation as a journalist. But for a career change moving from Pittsburgh to New York City this reputation was only applicable to a certain degree. Consequently, this means that she had to apply other narrative devices within her writing over and over again that could indicate her reputation. This was caused without doubt because people perceived her as a woman first and as a journalist second.

The only data that can be assessed in regard to her reputation are the articles and its geographical circulation, mentioning either Bly, or written by Bly herself. To briefly analyze her assumed reputation proves important because it offers further insights into Bly's invention of a distinctive writer's persona in specific. Because she was one of the few women in journalism at one of three big Pittsburgh newspapers in 1885 and 1886 it is highly likely that she has been renowned at least locally and regionally for readers. However at least nine articles were published in the same year she moved to New York City that were either by or

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<sup>421</sup> Nellie Bly, *Six Months in Mexico* (New York: John W. Lovell Company, 1888), 113.

<sup>422</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," in *Privilege, A Reader*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel, Abby L. Ferber (Boulder: Avalon Publishing 2003), 84.

<sup>423</sup> Stephen Garton, *Histories of Sexuality, Antiquity to Sexual Revolution* (London: Equinox Publishing 2006), 104.

about her, before the publication of the two installments about the asylum for the *World*. As a consequence Bly already had a moderately national recognition in the United States.<sup>424</sup>

Her efforts in New York City to become a journalist with the *World* was not only bound to her reputation as a journalist with the *Dispatch*, but also relied on her ability to link fictional elements to journalistic writing from the beginning of her career. This ability can already be found in the adoption of her writer's name Nellie Bly, given to her by an editor of the *Dispatch* as discussed in the next paragraph. By the late nineteenth century, Michael Saler wrote that the middle-class “experienced fewer cultural prohibitions against pretending that imaginary worlds were real”<sup>425</sup> and alongside “the ideal of objectivity”<sup>426</sup> as “a particularly refined and elevated philosophy of journalistic independence”<sup>427</sup> had not yet been established. With Bly's report on the Women's Lunatic Asylum, but also with her earlier journalistic endeavors we can thus see how her self-writing practice fitted into newspapers' appropriation of fictional terminologies to uncover the treatments of marginalized groups in New York City. Moreover, focusing on fictional terminologies and narratives within her self-writing also uncovers the efficacy of gendered, racialized, and class-based structures in the late nineteenth century.

Most of the aforementioned nationally published articles were not about Nellie Bly but about *Nelly* Bly. Nelly Bly was originally the title of a song composed and performed by Stephen Collins Foster. In this minstrel song Nelly Bly, the protagonist, was a young house slave. House slaves were often aligned in American literature and popular culture with the patronage of a so-called benevolent master in contrast to field slaves who were narratively connected to a malevolent master.<sup>428</sup> The figuration of the house slave became famous in American culture through Foster's popular minstrel song. Most of the articles were thus about a fictional minstrel figure called Nelly Bly. This was the origin of Bly's writing alias. From the start of her career Bly was thus caught between on the one hand racialized and gendered

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<sup>424</sup> Bly published articles in newspapers in Oregon, South Dakota, and Louisiana in 1887 besides her engagement as a special correspondent for the *Dispatch*. My findings are based on a search conducted in the Library of Congress database, ‘Chronicling America,’ that covers 2,167 newspapers from every state in the United States and in the Gale Cengage Learning database of nineteenth-century U.S. newspapers that covers 400 newspapers. The search for “Nellie Bly” and “Nelly Bly” found 29 entries from various States. The *Pittsburg Dispatch* 1887 volume is not yet digitized.

<sup>425</sup> Michael Saler, *As If, Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>426</sup> Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press, The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 184.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Slaves were discontented with their bondage whether they were kept as house- or field-slaves. This was documented by an abundance of manuscripts and narrative materials. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism, The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1983), 123–24.

attributions and on the other hand her self-writing practice that to a certain degree reappropriated these attributions. Nelly Bly's name, although slightly altered from Nelly to Nellie, had already been in the cultural imagination of the United States. Her alias thus preceded Nellie Bly when she arrived in New York City in May 1887. It had been aligned for decades with the racialized stereotype of a house servant and the song's fame was not on the wane. At the time, Bly arrived in New York City the Harlem Theatre Comique, a theater company, had a revival "of some of the late Stephen [Collins] Foster's plaintive ballads"<sup>429</sup> in its program – including the song *Nellie Bly*.

Her first editor, George Madden from the *Dispatch*, chose this song's title as a writer's alias for her in 1885.<sup>430</sup> Foster, the composer of *Nelly Bly*, was the most prominent songwriter of his day and his music, according to Matthew Shaftel, "became the backbone of the American minstrel show in the 1840s."<sup>431</sup> His song *Nelly Bly* was about a "comely colored servant," the daughter of a former slave he knew and was inspired by.<sup>432</sup> It was basically a song about a musician playing a song to a house servant (Nelly Bly) that would "bring the broom along" and clean the floor.<sup>433</sup> The song was written at the beginning of 1850 and already copyrighted on February 8, 1850.<sup>434</sup> The announcement of a theater event in *The Tribune* in 1887 included a revival of Foster's songs in New York, including *Nelly Bly*. It indicated that by 1887 the song was still famous enough to get a revival in New York City. Played in Harlem theaters even 37 years later, it was, however, not only the minstrel song about the young slave girl that became long lastingly famous. The songs' protagonist Nelly Bly had gained a life of her own in between, as seen in a syndicated article published in early 1887 by four different newspapers. Authored by a so-called Youth Companion it featured in their respective young readers' section a little valentine story in which a Nellie Bly was the

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<sup>429</sup> N.N. "New York City" in *New York Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1887, 8:2.

<sup>430</sup> The first article by Bly for the *Dispatch* "The Girl Puzzle" assailed the rich for their lack of concern for the female poor, asking for the consideration of jobs in fields where mostly men were employed and addressing the leaders of the women's rights movement to "(t)ake some girls that have the ability, procure for them situations, start them on their way and by so doing accomplish more than by years of talking." It was published on January 25, 1885 and prominently placed at the top of the paper's new and successful Sunday edition. The article was signed "Orphan Girl," the name Bly used for her reader's letter to the *Dispatch*. After writing another controversial article about divorce, Madden decided to make her a permanent member of the *Dispatch*. Madden wanted to have a name that sounded "neat and catchy" and asked the newsroom for suggestions, one proposition was Nellie Bly. See Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 42–44.

<sup>431</sup> Matthew Shaftel, "Singing a New Song. Stephen Foster and the New American Minstrelsy" in: *Music & Politics* Vol. 1, Issue 2, Summer 2007: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.203> [Feb. 23, 2017].

<sup>432</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 44.

<sup>433</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 44.

<sup>434</sup> See also Part III – Chapter 3.1 James Weldon Johnson's practice of writing and the adaption of the white novelist Kipling for his own needs, as a counter-appropriation to the long history of exploitation of the music of Black Americans. John Tasker Howard, Fletcher Hodges, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1934), 178.

main protagonist.<sup>435</sup> Madden picked out this name for Bly and it carried this racialized image with it from the very beginning. If the utilization of a slave's name for a minstrel song mirrored the violent usurpation of black culture and history in the United States, then the manifold reutilizations of the name Nellie Bly in popular culture showed the normalcy of using both racialized and gendered attributions. In fact, whatever Madden's reason had been for choosing this alias, he certainly knew the cultural imagination embedded within the name. For decades, this song of a house slave cleaning the house while she would "hab a little song"<sup>436</sup> for herself circulated through American popular culture, and Madden would surely be aware of the racialized stereotypes when he picked this name and used it for a young white female journalist. The cultural and violent background embedded in this usage was important because it was a mode of transportation for distinct racialized and gendered images that Bly would use later on in her two installments about the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island as well. Bly did not reject Madden's name choice for her. She asked for a name "neat and catchy" and it was the custom that women who wanted to write for newspapers, could only do so without revealing their birth name.<sup>437</sup> For this reason it is important to think about the connection between Bly's reputations as a journalist with regard to her attempts to find employment in New York City. Furthermore, every editor Bly met, met Nellie Bly, born Elizabeth Jane Cochran, but they also met the reality of violence of the slave trade as well, which was embedded in the history of the name Nelly Bly.

Unquestionably a historically accurate differentiation between Nellie Bly and *Nelly Bly* becomes hard to demonstrate in the first place. Another article for instance featured Nellie Bly, spelling the surname with -ie, and was titled "An Outrage."<sup>438</sup> It appeared in *The Wichita Daily Eagle* on April 20, 1887, a newspaper of Wichita in Midwest Kansas. The brief article mentions a "sweet, confiding woman"<sup>439</sup> who signed "herself Nellie Bly." She asked the editor of the *Emporia Republican*, a neighboring city, how to get rid of the "innumerable army of able-bodied tramp peddler who annoy the house-keepers to death almost with their impudence and pertinacity."<sup>440</sup> The editor – the unknown author of the *Wichita Daily Eagle*

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<sup>435</sup> Although the article referred to Nellie, spelled with -ie at the end, it is very likely that this short valentine story referred to the minstrel song's protagonist, given that it ran for a month in newspapers of the former slave-owning states of the South in Arizona, Mississippi, Missouri, and Kansas. Youth Companion, "Two Little Girls," in: *Thomas County cat.* (Colby, Kan.), 24 Feb. 1887; in: *The Arizona Sentinel* (Arizona City, Arizona) February 19, 1887; *The Southern Herald* (Liberty, Miss.), March 12, 1887; *Iron County Register* (Ironton, Iron County, Mo.), February 03, 1887.

<sup>436</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 44.

<sup>437</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 44.

<sup>438</sup> M.M. Murdock, "An Outrage," in: *Wichita Daily Eagle*, April 20, 1887, 2:2.

<sup>439</sup> Murdock, "An Outrage," 2:2.

<sup>440</sup> Murdock, "An Outrage," 2:2.

wrote – advised, “to try one of her biscuits on the next appearing peddler.” It is completely unclear, who the person was, who asked the editor of the *Republican* this question, and signed the letter with Nellie Bly. Was it someone who posed as Nellie Bly, the burgeoning journalist from Pittsburg, or someone who just misspelled the name of the fictional character Nelly Bly? The author of the *Eagle* article nevertheless was for his part, “ashamed that an organ of our side should show such a want of consideration to a womanly appeal.”<sup>441</sup> This article may seem unimportant at first, but it connected the racialized and gendered image of the moniker Nellie Bly with the notion of the so-called tramp peddlers, and thereby indicated that in this name lies as much a history of class, a history of the working poor, as that of a racialized and gendered image. Peddlers have been around as early as the seventeenth century, and are sometimes depicted as modern-day nomads trying to sell goods that they could carry. In the nineteenth century, it was a low-income job done by many former slaves, and they were clustered in the lowest strata of the economic ladders, alongside domestic servants, boardinghouse keepers, laundresses and waitresses. It is rather unlikely that Nellie Bly in this short report was Nellie Bly the journalist, but at this point it became unclear if someone posed as Nelly Bly, based on the now fictionalized slave girl, or if the person mentioned in the article already referred to Nellie Bly, the reporter from the *Dispatch*.<sup>442</sup> Whatever may be true, Nellie Bly – the moniker – was widely used throughout the United States for various marginalized individuals.

As a second point, even if one puts aside the racialized, gendered and classified imagery in this moniker, there were more articles published throughout the United States that directly opposed the assumption that Nellie Bly the journalist was only regionally renowned. For example another short skit in a newspaper from South Dakota already labeled her under the headline “Prominent People”<sup>443</sup> in April 1887 and announced that the “well-known female correspondent of the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, who is only 20 years old, is about to go on the stage.”<sup>444</sup> Arthur Rehan, the younger brother of actress and theater manager Ada Rehan and later manager of many of Augustin Daly’s theatrical plays, was meant to be the manager of a play based on Nellie Bly’s life, even before her rise to celebrity status as a journalist with her articles for the *World*. The announcement of the play can also be found in the *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, a newspaper from Pennsylvania, as early as February 1887.<sup>445</sup> The play itself, it seems, was never produced. Nonetheless, Bly was already prominent enough to be

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> N.N., “Prominent People,” *Wessington Springs Herald*, March 11, 1887, 1.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.



mentioned in the news with society people like Daly and Rehan even before she arrived in New York City. A newspaper from a small community in the Bossier parish in Louisiana, *The Bossier Banner* even featured an article by Bly when she just had settled in New York City.<sup>446</sup> The topic “Funerals in Mexico” picked up her trip to Mexico more than a year earlier. Taking these entire articles into account, I argue that Bly was, in contrast to earlier research, known as a journalist throughout the United States well before she moved to New York City.

### 3.2. Becoming a “woman journalist” in New York City

The image of Nellie Bly, and the moniker, was already well established in the United States as we have seen. And Nellie Bly, the journalist, was renowned in the United States before moving to New York City. Nonetheless, she had to rely on her professional relationship with the *Dispatch* staff back in Pittsburgh to get into the offices of the newspapers in New York City. Although the 1880s saw a period of depression that persisted into the mid-1890s<sup>447</sup> the newspaper business was thriving. The *World* for example catapulted their circulation between 1883 and 1887 from 20,000 to 200,000 on Sundays alone.<sup>448</sup> But a tenfold increase in circulation would not automatically translate into new jobs in the newspaper business for women. The tenth census of 1880 in the United States counted a total of 12,308 journalists in the United States, of which only 288 were female.<sup>449</sup> Within the confines of New York City, newspapers engaged 816 journalists, with only 23 being female. It is very likely on the one hand that these numbers increased up to 1887, but on the other hand it did not mean that a new, young, and female journalist from out of town would get job at one of the most successful newspapers at that time, the *World*. Bly wanted to work for the *World*, probably because she knew of the reframing of the newspaper into a news outlet that used a more sensationalist approach since the acquisition by Joseph Pulitzer in 1883. This reframing increased the circulation of the *World*, and therefore at least offered a higher chance of employment for reporters like Bly. Pulitzer rearranged the newspaper’s appearance and style and his staff worked with similar writing practices already established by Bly when she was working for the *Dispatch* in Pittsburgh. The sensationalist appearance, as for instance the usage of illustrations, catchy headlines, an arc of suspense, the appropriation of a terminology rather akin to fictional literature, as well as the increased circulation of the *World* offered a

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<sup>446</sup> Nellie Bly, “Funerals in Mexico,” in *The Bossier Banner*, July 21, 1887, 1:5.

<sup>447</sup> Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 2.

<sup>448</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 80. Joseph Pulitzer invented a lurid and grisly sensational style with provocative headlines, strong use of illustrations, crusades and contests, and an excellent editorial page. Importantly, he understood to draw upon the topics of interest for the immigrants because he saw immigrants as a diverse pool of potential readers.

<sup>449</sup> Department of the Interior, Census Office: Statistics of the population of the United States at the tenth census (June 1, 1880).

good chance of employment for Bly. The freelance work she did for the *Dispatch* as a special correspondent from New York City already challenged gendered ideas of behavior as seen in her article “Women Journalists.”<sup>450</sup> Her approach was used and utilized by Pulitzer to a certain degree. After all, being a woman in journalism turned out to be a sensation for the editors of the newspapers, of whom all were men. She reappropriated this environment; she invented herself as a “sensational heroine” in many of her articles. Jean-Marie Lutes therefore described her articles “as an arena in which women acted simultaneously as objects and agents.”<sup>451</sup> But it was not just the similarity of their writing techniques that made her fitting for employment at the *World*.

The *World's* rise in circulation was partly due to a combination for “a taste for the lurid and grisly sensations and scandals of the day, captured in provocative headlines, with top-notch reporting of all the day’s news, strong use of illustrations, crusades and contests, and an editorial page renowned for its excellence.”<sup>452</sup> And within this shift in journalistic writing, to which other longtime leaders in the newspaper business like the sophisticated *New York Sun* and the elitist *New York Herald* were soon to be forced to play catch up, the statistics of the Tenth Census that indicated the strong absence of women in journalism may be translated in quite another way. Exactly because of Bly’s outsider status as a woman in journalism she may have fitted exactly into the new sensationalistic approach at Pulitzer’s *World*. Moreover, it showed the intertwining of Bly’s practice of writing and the exclusion of women from the working force, as seen in detail in the last *Dispatch* article she wrote, when she already had been living in New York City for three months. In this important article, which paved her way into New York City’s newspaper world, we can already see what would become one of her key techniques of journalistic writing: the double fictionalization of author and protagonist within her stories.

Bly’s last article published by the *Dispatch*, right before she managed to get on to the *World's* payroll, was titled “Women Journalists.”<sup>453</sup> In the *Dispatch*, article headlines consisted of one major headline and four more sub-headlines. The article’s sub-headlines under “Women Journalists” gave a brief outline of the rest of the article, and some of the leading editors were already singled out here:

Views of leading editors as to their availability to work in Gotham.  
Mr. Dana [*Sun*] is devoid of prejudice.  
But, like Dr. Hepworth [*Herald*], Colonel Cockerill [*World*] and others prefers the men.  
One editor who favors the fair sex.

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<sup>450</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:3.

<sup>451</sup> Lutes, “Into the Madhouse,” 219.

<sup>452</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 80.

<sup>453</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:1.

The editor's name, Foster Coates of the *Mail and Express*, was not mentioned in the last sub-headline and thereby generated a reader's interest in who might favor the so-called "fair sex." Bly posits the "fair sex" – a patronizing and subjugating term for women – in combination with the editor who favors women. Bly used her professional connections to the *Dispatch* to write about the situation of women journalists in New York City. She wrote exactly about what she wanted to do and wanted to be and turned this into an article and a plea for women in journalism. Although most editors did not favor so-called women journalists, it made it a key issue and thus brought a visibility to women in journalism that they did not previously have.

Writing as a special correspondent for the *Dispatch* as well brought in some money, as Bly had no prospect of a local job in New York City, nor any other income.<sup>454</sup> She wrote women's features that she sent back for publication, but by writing about women journalists she wrote about her own situation that helped her to get the attention and the direct personal contact with the editors. She wrote about the viewpoints of the newspaper editors – the decision makers – on women in journalism. A field in which women were barely employed as writers, and were more often subjects men wrote about. Through her article, she offered the readership a glimpse into the newspaper editor's stance on women journalists. But it was also information she needed because it was her one goal in New York City, to be a journalist. Her track record with the *Dispatch* offered the newspaper editors a glimpse into her work, as well as her standing in the newspaper world. Although she was very young and only had two years of professional experience, she had been with the *Dispatch* in Pittsburgh, an unquestionably well-known newspaper in Pennsylvania at that time. The *Sun's* editor Charles A. Dana described the *Dispatch* as a "very clever, bright paper,"<sup>455</sup> and it is very likely that she would not have gotten into the newspaper offices had it not have been for her affiliation with that particular paper.

The article about women journalists commenced with the introduction of a young journalist that in Bly words questioned her in a letter about the possibility of a career as a journalist in New York City as a woman. Bly thus began her article by assuring the reader that she had "[I]ast week [...] received a letter from a lady, ambitious and presumably young, who is desirous of becoming a journalist."<sup>456</sup> It remains unclear if this young journalist really existed, but even if not, the story was now told through the eyes of another young female journalist. Bly fashioned herself to be the champion of young journalists and *en passant*

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<sup>454</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 81.

<sup>455</sup> Bly, "Women Journalists," 9:3.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

published an uncommon article featuring the ideas of the leading New Yorker newspaper editors regarding women in journalism. This short twist paved the way into the rest of the article, which presented six editors from the *New York Sun*, the *New York Times*, the *New York World*, the *New York Herald*, the *Mail and Express* to the *New York Telegram*. The article was almost in its entirety written in a dialogue form between her and the editors, with occasional, sometimes causal remarks and annotations by Bly. Short excerpts of interviews were embedded in the article and it was as much an interview by Bly conducted with the editors, as it was an interview for Bly as a potential journalist at the respective newspapers. This tactic, her self-fashioning as a writer and embedding herself, or in this case, telling her story through the eyes of another person, was the starting point of the story. It was a technique that offered the reader an identificatory element from the very beginning.

The focus of the article was not unlike her stories about young workingwomen, female divorcees and working poor for the *Dispatch*. It was a reoccurring theme in her articles: the dire situation of young women. To report – as Kroeger posits – about the “plight of Pittsburgh’s poor working girls was Bly’s first theme in print.”<sup>457</sup> Her articles in the *Dispatch* “were unlike most others in the newspaper, and the public often responded to her calls for change.”<sup>458</sup> But Bly’s reporting style varied. To picture her solely as a voice of the women’s working force at the end of the nineteenth century would ignore other articles in which her first-person narrative channeled other’s interests as well. For example, in the eight-part series about the Pittsburgh factories growing female workforce she did not call so much for a change but instead “judged by the current standard, the articles read like a Chamber of Commerce booster pamphlet, free from any criticism of the eight factories she toured.”<sup>459</sup> The short article about women journalists in New York City was then again different. It was neither an explicit call for change in journalism nor an ad for the newspapers in New York City. It was a tool for Bly to get into the newspaper world on the one hand and to address the situation of women in journalism on the other hand.

As already mentioned in the headlines most of the editors were in one way or another biased towards women in journalism. Dana, the *Sun*’s editor asserted that women “have the ability”<sup>460</sup> and that “there is no reason why they should not do the work as well as men.”<sup>461</sup> Dana outlined his opinion and qualified his statement with regards to the lack of education of women and the “necessity” of women – invoking that women cannot “as a class, do equally

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<sup>457</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 44.

<sup>458</sup> Bragg, “Nellie Bly: Flying in the Face of Tradition,” 266.

<sup>459</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 46.

<sup>460</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:1.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:3.

good work, for the very reason that women have never been educated up to in the same manner as men.”<sup>462</sup> He also connected his ideas of women as journalists to the history of the frontier in the United States, asserting that in “the West, where good men are not plenty, clever women are employed. Here there is a superabundance of first-class men.”<sup>463</sup> Both themes were not so much derived by prejudice but hinted to the gendered hierarchies that structured the workforce in general. It was true that education for women, especially in a field like journalism, was scarce. But education was not yet professionalized in journalism altogether, neither for men nor for women. There were no universities that taught journalism for that matter, getting a job with the newspapers basically relied on the selection processes of the editors in charge. And not so many of the men were willing to give women a chance to write about topics other than fashion or gardening, so-called women-related topics.<sup>464</sup> Bly – in the article “Women Journalists” – depicted Dana as having an “intelligent face, framed by silvery hair and beard, [who] had a look of kindness which half dispelled the fear of interviewing so great a man,” and asked him if he was opposed to women as journalists. His answer was that he was not against women; “if a woman can do assigned work as well as a man, there is no reason why there should be discrimination to her disfavor.”<sup>465</sup> For a late 1880s newspaper editor this seems to be a rather progressive statement, but embedded within this statement was the notion of the self-made man that women had to align to. As the self-made man trope was bound to the pervasive belief that everything is possible through one’s own merit and hard work it was a key ingredient of American masculinities at the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, women could become journalists, if they acted like men – which then again was pathologized and rendered abnormal by medico-legal discourse.

Bly defied the aforementioned perception of the all-encompassing gendered system. She skillfully rearranged this paradoxical situation created and propelled by the “newspaper’s gods,” or to put it another way the men in New York City’s newspaper offices. Bly points this out in her article. For instance, Dana posits here when asked about his view on women as journalists that men were preferable for one reason, which is reminiscent of an argumentation put forward in nineteenth-century etiquette manuals<sup>466</sup>:

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<sup>462</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:3

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 9:1.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> An abundance of etiquette manuals cautioned young women in Antebellum America for instance to emulate behavior that was not following Victorian ideals of piety and purity. Women for instance emulating the arts of the so-called painted women were sometimes considered to be prostitutes, or more often women of fashion, who poisoned polity society. See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women, A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) XIV.

while a woman might be ever so clever in obtaining news and putting it into works, we could not feel at liberty to call her out at 1 o'clock in the morning to report at a fire or a crime. In such a case we never hesitate with a man. That is why the latter is preferable.<sup>467</sup>

Several advice books, etiquette manuals and fashion magazines from the first half of the nineteenth century on cautioned young women against leaving the house without the company of a man. Women could not go out alone at midnight because contemporary men associated this with prostitution. Dana subsequently qualified his statement with remarks about women's lack of accuracy, how "they find it impossible not to exaggerate,"<sup>468</sup> and some more derogative remarks towards the abilities of women in the journalist's workforce. Bly added a little annotation to this remark in parentheses, commenting directly on Dana's stance: "Here I groaned, mentally, for the fate of the interview."<sup>469</sup> Bly re-registered the derogative remarks by Dana through this short, but powerful annotation. Another comment followed to Bly's question: "How do women secure positions in New York?"<sup>470</sup> Dana replied with "I really cannot say."<sup>471</sup> Bly depicted the movements of the editor by annotating that he said this "with a twinkle in his eye."<sup>472</sup> She furthermore qualified her perception of what Dana said and expressed with his body language. For her it "mildly suggested the absurdity of asking him this question,"<sup>473</sup> hinting to the not yet thinkable situation for Dana – and many other editors – that women could be journalists. It was here that Bly reversed the male gaze on women, put forward in medico-legal discourse and in other professional fields like journalism. It was the woman that depicted men's sayings and doings, not the other way around, as it was the case within, for example, the medical profession at the end of the nineteenth century where men studied the bodily movements of women and pathologized them.

Male journalists and many of the editors felt threatened when Bly asked them for interviews, as we can see in this article. Even if editors like Dr. Hepworth of *The Herald* did not object to "women entering newspaper life,"<sup>474</sup> their actions spoke a different language, sometimes only a few lines later in the same article: "But, do you know they are a restraint in an office? The men do not feel at liberty to take off their coats or rest their feet on the desks; and then – I might as well add – they are too much of a guard morally."<sup>475</sup> Most male journalists considered themselves to be guardians of women. When women were "within hearing, men cannot give vent to their feelings in the language all grades of angry men

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<sup>467</sup> Bly, "Women Journalists," 9:1.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 9:2.

employ,” was one of the arguments Dr. Hepworth used for depicting why it was difficult for him to hire women. Other editors posited the abundance of qualified men in New York City and the lack of qualified women on the other hand. Foster Coates, editor of the *Mail and Express*, put forward the “general all-around or emergency work they are not available”<sup>476</sup> for as journalists, because their “dress, constitution and habits of life keep them from the routine of a reporter’s work.”<sup>477</sup> In the late nineteenth-century United States “several social factors converged to cause the eroticizing of consciousness, behavior, emotion, and identity,”<sup>478</sup> but Victorian middle-class notions of purity and piety did not just vanish as indicated by the newspaper editor’s statements. In other words, Bly’s reputation as a journalist was caught between Victorian ideals and the newspaper’s search for a broader readership. Especially Pulitzer’s *World* tried to appeal “to a multi-ethnic, cross-class audience” attempting to “speak to the needs of the most vulnerable members of urban society: immigrants, women, the working poor, even the barely literate.”<sup>479</sup> This socio-economical environment shaped the possibilities of women in journalism as a result.

The stances of other editors when it came to women in journalism were filled with similar prejudices. They would be suited for “clerical, fashion and society news”<sup>480</sup> and were furthermore “on account of the sensations and the scandals which are demanded by the present popular taste”<sup>481</sup> not suitable, because “a gentleman could not, in delicacy ask a woman to have anything to do with that class of news.”<sup>482</sup> Charles Ransom Miller of the *Times* answered that they “had a lady on the paper for years, who reports all the cattle markets in a manner which far surpasses that of any man,”<sup>483</sup> again relegating women to a narrow field of reporting, and in addition pointing out the necessity to be better as a man. Bly furthermore quoted Colonel John A. Cockerill of the *World*, the editor of the newspaper that employed Bly only one and a half months later, with the assertion that they “do not encourage women here, because we have a deluge of good men unemployed”<sup>484</sup> and that the range of coverage women “are fitted for is so limited that a man is of far greater service.”<sup>485</sup> Robert G. Morris, editor the *New York Telegram*, claimed, “they can go to a reception and obtain every little detail of the

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” 85.

<sup>479</sup> Lutes, “Into the Madhouse,” 241.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Bly, “Women Journalists,” 9:2.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

event, which a man misses entirely.”<sup>486</sup> Although not openly making derogatory remarks, the intention here was clear, as it was with the other editors’ remarks: Women were fit to be fashion journalists. What Morris saw then was an economical chance to employ women because they were familiar with “everything that belongs to a wedding, reception, ball or similar event, and has it all for use, while a man does not even know enough to ask sensible questions.”<sup>487</sup> The one editor Bly singled out as the one who “replied most favorably”<sup>488</sup> was the editor of *The New York Mail and Express*, Foster Coates who said that “[w]omen are invaluable to a newspaper.”<sup>489</sup> He continued: “There are certain things they can do, and in a talking style peculiarly their own. Their manner of reporting certain events can never be equaled by a man. There is a peculiarity in expression entirely feminine, which pleases and attracts readers.”<sup>490</sup> It is clear that Coates saw an additional value in hiring women because of the anticipated gains in readership. But, women in journalism in New York City were by far the exception not the rule, and therefore, the content must have been perceived as a special and curious topic. The *Dispatch*, the newspaper that had employed Bly for almost two years at that time, published this article and therefore it carried the weight of a renowned Pennsylvanian newspaper’s reputation. What made it more special was that Bly commented on the editors’ stances on women in the workforce and that it already had employed some of the self-writing practices that were essential in her next two articles she wrote for the *World*.

### 3.3. Writing oneself into the Madhouse - “Behind Asylum Bars”

On the 22d of September I was asked by *The World* if I could have myself committed to one of the Asylums for the Insane in New York, with a view to writing a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein and the methods of management, etc.<sup>491</sup>

Bly’s article on “Women Journalists” proved to be a widely read and circulated story – excerpts were even republished in other newspapers like *The Mail and Express*. Although it opened some doors and gave her insight into what the newspaper editors thought about journalists, it was not yet enough to be offered a full-time job as a journalist at one of the newspapers right away. At the same time Joseph Howard, Jr., a former newspaperman of the *World* criticized the “lamentable ignorance of Sunday newspaper editors [...] on the subject of women in journalism”<sup>492</sup> in one of his syndicated “Howard Letter” columns in *The Boston Globe*. *The Journalist*, a newspaper serving the professional journalistic community, reprinted

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> Bly, “Behind Asylum Bars,” 25:1

<sup>492</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 83.



these remarks, along with a list of notable women correspondents, topped by “Miss Nellie Bly [who] came here from Pittsburg where she made name and fame and cash.”<sup>493</sup> The *Mail and Express* described Bly as a “bright and talented young woman who has done a great deal of good writing for the newspapers.”<sup>494</sup> According to Bly neither her reputation nor the supportive columns by Howard, Jr. were enough to secure a job with a New Yorker newspaper. It needed another effort by her, as the newspaper reader learned almost two years later.

Bly wrote a backstory about her first two installments for the *World* about the Women’s Lunatic Asylum in 1887 in which she described how she came to be a writer for Pulitzer’s newspaper. Here she adapted antebellum ideals of American individualism of young men’s character formation. In the late nineteenth century, young men were assumed to be in command of their own destinies. This ideal was disseminated in the tropes of the self-made man, self-government and self-reliance. Bly wrote that she “was penniless” by the end of August 1887. However, she continued: “[I] was too proud to return to the position I had left in search of new worlds to conquer. Indeed, I cannot say the thought ever presented itself to me, for I never in my life turned back from a course I had started upon.”<sup>495</sup> This backstory was published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, a monthly magazine published in Philadelphia. In this backstory she rendered herself in a terminology that was similar to the burgeoning trope of the self-made man: “Energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything.”<sup>496</sup> According to her, she gained admission to the offices of the *World* by saying that she had “an important subject to propose.”<sup>497</sup> She asserts that “[w]ithout wasting any time, I laid before Col. Cockerill some plans for newspaper work, as desperate as they were startling for a girl to attempt to carry out.”<sup>498</sup> Cockerill gave her 25 dollars “to keep her from going elsewhere”<sup>499</sup> and told her to get back to him on September the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Bly offered the *World’s* editor to travel to Europe and return steerage class to report firsthand the experiences of immigrants moving to the United States. Cockerill, however, according to Bly’s first lines in “Behind Asylum Bars,” commissioned her to feign insanity and write a piece about the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island instead.<sup>500</sup> The sources vary as to who devised the plan to report about the Women’s Lunatic Asylum. Various sources cited either Cockerill or Pulitzer;

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Nellie Bly, “Among the Mad,” in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1883–1892), Jan.: 1889, 118.

<sup>496</sup> Bly, “Among the Mad,” 118.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 85.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 86; Bragg, “Nellie Bly: Flying in the Face of Tradition,” 268.

Dianne Bragg argued that it might have come straight from Bly as well, and that she was the one who devised the plan to have herself committed. Again, the focus here is neither if Bly's story about how she in the end secured employment with the *World* was right or wrong; nor is it a matter of historical accuracy embedded in her story that I'm interested in in the first place. Given the sources either story could be true. The focus here is Bly's diachronic self-fashioning in and through her writings.<sup>501</sup> By diachronic self-fashioning I refer to Bly's starting paragraphs that often featured a description of herself or another person, enabling the reader to identify with the article's protagonist and follow the unfolding story.

One element of her practice of self-fashioning through writing was to depict the movements of her own body. This has already become apparent in her "Women Journalists" article when she commented on *The Sun's* editor Dana ruminations on accuracy by pointing out how she restricted her body to act out the impulse she had and "groaned, mentally."<sup>502</sup> The depiction and translation of the self-controlled woman's body into writing was on the one hand adapting the medical gaze shaped by men through observing, treating, and patronizing women. By this translation of her body's movement into writing (and then into publicity through print), on the other hand, Bly acquired a distinctive agency that propelled women (and the potential readers) into the role of the observers, which in fact becomes even more obvious in her two articles on the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island. Therefore, as a woman she had to partly adapt the male gaze of the medical profession that observed women's bodies and put into writing their (her) bodies' movements. Physicians and lawyers alike assumed a "hysterical side of feminine nature" and that "women lose their heads, and often their lives in a great crisis."<sup>503</sup> Bly's answer to this gendered figuration of ways to societal participation "transformed her own white, middle-class body into a vehicle of publicity that anchored her pursuit of 'the real' in corporeal experience"<sup>504</sup> as Lutes pointed out.

Bly's asylum articles were now located between the burgeoning professionalization of the medico-juridical institutions and the aligned harbingers of professionalization of the press sector alike.<sup>505</sup> The two articles on the Women's Lunatic Asylum turned out to be so

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<sup>501</sup> Neither the statements of the editors nor Bly's 'making-of' on her piece on the Women's Lunatic Asylum in Godey's *Lady's Book* can be verified through other sources. But almost all scholars took the articles at face value.

<sup>502</sup> Bly, "Women Journalists," 9:2.

<sup>503</sup> Eliza Archard Connor, "Women in the Light of Law and Medicine," in *Bulletin of the Medico-Legal Congress*, New York, Medico-Legal Journal 1898, 76.

<sup>504</sup> Lutes, "Into the Madhouse," 220.

<sup>505</sup> By professionalization I refer to the institutionalization in societies, schools, departments, and universities that had an efficacy in shaping a distinctive language, aligned with inventing categories that then again could propel from body (group) to body (group).

successful that they were published as a book only a couple of months later as *Ten Days in a Mad-House*.<sup>506</sup> One of the features of this professionalization was establishing identity categories that were produced along the lines of dyadic thought as normal and abnormal, between male and female, between masculine and feminine, and between cultural and natural. Bly challenged these binarizations from within the burgeoning mass-press sector with her practice of self-writing; at a moment when the economy of the mass and penny press was propelling into its widest-circulation and sought fiercely the attention of readers. For this reason, Bly established a narrative that used elements of fiction. The practice of Bly's self-writing as a "woman journalist" told through her self-fashioning helped to uncover the social reality and efficacy of gendered power structures in the Women's Asylum in the City of New York.

Bly depicted reporters as the solution to mysteries in general again and again in her first article "Behind Asylum Bars" published on October 9, 1887. As she invented herself as the protagonist of a mystery-story shaped essay and successfully impersonated insanity, she was brought before the Essex Market Police courtroom, where "at last the question of [her] sanity or insanity was to be decided."<sup>507</sup> She feared the reporters of other newspapers would uncover her impersonation because "if there is any one who can ferret out a mystery it is a reporter."<sup>508</sup> Thereby she questioned the authority of institutions of the medico-legal complex: "I felt that I would rather face a mass of expert doctors, policemen and detectives than two bright specimens of my craft..."<sup>509</sup> The use of fictional elements was therefore not only a means to uncover mysteries. The fictional elements were uncovering the assumed failure of the practices of police forces, judges, lawyers, physicians, and other professions that were part of her journey "Into the Madhouse." Bly wrote "[t]he mystery of the unknown insane girl," as the first article's sub-headline stated. The following sub-headlines furthermore posit the practices by which she deceived an expert network of people, by impersonation and passing. It was announced as a "[r]emarkable story of the successful impersonation of insanity." She pointed out her pseudonym in the third headline she would use for her trip: "How Nellie Brown deceived judges, reporters and medical experts" and the last headline refers to the mode presentation: "She tells her story of how she passed at Bellevue Hospital" – the last place in Manhattan she entered before reaching the asylum on Blackwell's Island. The reader had been introduced to a mystery story, which was about to reveal the reality of the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island.

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<sup>506</sup> As her two installments for *The World* were titled for book release only a couple of months later.

<sup>507</sup> Bly "Behind Asylum Bars," 34.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

Before analyzing Bly's article on the Women's Asylum more closely, the burgeoning mass press in the United States in general, and in New York City specifically, needs to be addressed. One reason is because stunt-journalism from the mid-1880s until the mid-1890s allowed for and supported the practice of self-writing to a considerable degree.<sup>510</sup> Why did Bly – why did the *World* – consider themselves mystery solvers? And how much was this self-practice intertwined with the uncovering of the city's mysteries? Bly's "friendly, familiar, and opinionated writing style, and her myriad details of New York street life and behind-doors shenanigans" was exactly the tone that suited the *World's* new journalism. Bly's self-writing practice seen in her articles lingered on the invention of fictional narrative. With a deep analysis of her article on the Women's Asylum one can see how this was intertwined within a medico-legal discourse formation. For the new journalism approach of the late nineteenth century, however, the "ideal of entertainment was primary, creating in its articles an ongoing dance between the literary (dramatic, sometimes fictionalized stories) and the journalistic (factual reportage)"<sup>511</sup> as Roggenkamp posits. This was the place in which so-called girl stunt-reporters could turn to the realities of publicly undiscovered, unseen, and unknown practices of the medical profession at places like Blackwell's Island's Women's Lunatic Asylum. The new journalism – as exemplified best with the *World's* sensationalistic approach – underwent a professionalization of its branch as well. As a consequence, Bly's asylum articles challenged the prerogative of interpretation of medico-legal experts. Consequently, the interpretational sovereignty of the city's hidden spaces and practices was also challenged by Bly's self-writing practice.

In 1887, when both articles on the Women's Asylum were published, Pulitzer's *World* invented a new form of journalism with its sensationalistic approach.<sup>512</sup> The 1880s preceded the 1890s' rise in storytelling, when "fictionalizing became so extreme that it ultimately brought a critical backlash that changed, once again, the face of the profession and its narration of the news."<sup>513</sup> The early twentieth century saw a professionalization in journalism through establishing journalism schools, colleges, and departments at universities. One of the starting points of this professionalization can be traced back to Robert E. Lee of Washington College in the United States who, in 1869, invited young men "intending to make practical

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<sup>510</sup> Until the journalists incorporation into an obscure group description, the "Meg Merriless," in which the personal accounts of these reporters were subsumed by newspaper editors. Lutes, "Into the Madhouse," 239.

<sup>511</sup> Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, XII.

<sup>512</sup> Matthew Arnold coined the phrase "new journalism" in 1887 in connection with Pulitzer's new sensationalistic and commercialized dramatic style of reporting. See Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, XII.

<sup>513</sup> Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News*, XVII.

printing and journalism their business in life.”<sup>514</sup> Educators and editors, however, opposed this stance, arguing that a journalistic ability was a gift, as Edwin Lawrence Godkin wrote, therefore education for journalism was absurd. While most of the “working press” agreed with him,<sup>515</sup> Pulitzer did not and proposed the establishment of a school of journalism to Columbia University in the early 1890s, a call that came to fruition when Columbia announced plans for the school in 1903.<sup>516</sup>

Bly’s practice of self-writing was carved into this burgeoning professionalization of the press sector and, moreover, into an economical shift. In the 1880s the burgeoning mass-press industry was a key element for the recovery of the accumulation of capital after the Long Depression in the 1870s. With the professionalization of the press-sector complex bureaucracies emerged as well, which made the idea of self-made manhood increasingly problematic. Furthermore, with the growth of the press industry, positions of economic dependency came to the forefront for journalists. For this reason, Bly’s self-writing practice adapting self-made man tropes, as exemplified above, challenged markers of male identity on various levels. By putting herself at the center of the story and to, in her words, “execute my delicate and [...] difficult mission,”<sup>517</sup> not inflicting “myself upon my friends” doing “[a]ll the preliminary preparations for my ordeal [...] by myself”<sup>518</sup> she strengthened the ties to self-made man ideals of self-sufficiency, and put these ideals to the test at the same time. As these ideals had been powerful ideals for young men in American culture for a long time – exemplified in the image of the western frontiersman – it seems puzzling why she was not met with stronger resistance. One answer is that Bly, by readapting the trope of the self-made man as a woman, was generating and producing another layer of sensation and excitement within the new sensationalistic approach of the newspapers, which helped to increase sales, as Frank Luther Mott pointed out:

The increasing newspaper emphasis on woman-interest was not due to the ‘emancipation’ of the sex, or to their new importance in industry and business, but mainly to the growth of department-store advertising. Such advertisements were directed chiefly to women in the home, and therefore newspapers – especially in their evening and Sunday editions – had to be made to appeal to women readers.<sup>519</sup>

Editors would not admit this. However, the style of journalism in the late nineteenth century which came to be the predominant one of the period was based on the fact that, for

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<sup>514</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *Time Enough, Essays in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 148.

<sup>515</sup> Mott, *Time Enough*, 150.

<sup>516</sup> Mott, *Time Enough*, 150.

<sup>517</sup> Bly, “Behind Asylum Bars,” 19.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690–1960* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1962), 599.

example, when “crime news came in without grotesque details, the editors often would add them.”<sup>520</sup> For an historical account of the practice of self-writing in the late 1880s this is important because it adds another layer of uncertainty to the already scarce sources at hand. There are no records that could verify to what extent Bly’s article about the asylum might have been edited by the *World*. But what it clearly does show is Bly’s practice of self-writing is closely related to the entanglement of the economical needs of the press sector that shaped a new journalism. This influenced other newspapers’ writing styles as well in the late 1880s.

A closer look on the starting dialogue between the *World*’s editor and Bly in the opening paragraph of “Behind Asylum Bars” proves to be of special interest for Bly’s self-writing practice. The introduction to the asylum texts put to the forefront how the article was realized in the first place. In “Women Journalism” the starting figuration was an unknown young girl wanting to be a journalist in New York City. “Behind Asylum Bars,” however, opened with a dialogue with the *World*’s editor that drew upon the conception of the article itself. The first paragraph started with how Bly had been asked by “*The World* if I could have myself committed to one of the Asylums for the Insane in New York.” The “plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients” that she was being asked to present was underlined by the instructions she got from the *World*:

I was to chronicle faithfully the experiences I underwent, and when once within the walls of the asylum to find out and describe its inside workings, which are always so effectually hidden by white-capped nurses, as well as by bolts and bars, from the knowledge of the public.<sup>521</sup>

The next statement by the *World* Bly embedded in her article reads: “We do not ask you to go there for the purpose of making sensational revelations,” which was clearly at odds with the style that followed. The first sub-headline already established that and was titled “The Mystery of the Unknown Insane Girl,” which clearly contradicted what was said in the first paragraph. If sensationalism turned out to sell newspapers the topic of sensationalism was still an “experimentation that grew out of intense competition among newspapers in Gilded Age America.”<sup>522</sup> This indicates that the *World*’s editorial board was uncertain about this new form of journalism. By distancing themselves from a sensationalistic approach, they indicated a desire to appear as a voice of reason, or to put it another way as a professional news outlet. By doing so the *World* positioned itself as an alternative to what medico-legal experts had to say about the situation in the asylum. In fact, it had been only a little more than ten years since one of the leader of cooperative news gathering through the Associated Press described the

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<sup>520</sup> David B. Sachsman, David W. Bulla, *Sensationalism, Murder, Mayhem, Mudslinging, Scandals, and Disasters in 19th-Century Reporting* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013) XXIV.

<sup>521</sup> Bly, “Behind Asylum Bars,” 19.

<sup>522</sup> Bruce J. Evensen, “Journalism,” in *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, eds. Christopher Mc Knight Nichols, Nancy C. Unger (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell’s, 2017), 178.

news business in America's centennial year as "war in the mud and mud to the neck."<sup>523</sup> The style in journalism changed with the *World* into using sensationalistic terminology, narratives, and references, but it was not yet established as a news business's way of self-denomination. Employing women was part of the *World's* experimentation, which, in turn, was utilized by writers like Bly.

With the help of this opening dialogue, reminiscing about the conception of the article, Bly invited the reader to follow her further steps through New York City. She uncovered the medical gaze told through her body's movements and revealed the patients' treatment by focusing on their physical ordeal. Bly's article read like an auto-ethnographical account through Manhattan from boardinghouse, to temporary home, police station, police court room, Bellevue Hospital, until she finally enters the "insane ward on the island [where she] made no attempt to keep up the assumed role of insanity,"<sup>524</sup> – it seemed futile to her, because "the more sanely I talked and acted the crazier I was thought to be."<sup>525</sup> The medico-legal institutions utilized and professionalized theories of sexology, neurasthenia, and phrenology. With a medical gaze, they categorized behaviors and desires along the lines of gender, race, and ability. At the same time, Bly upended the medical terminology and in fact the medical gaze by depicting the ward as insane. By this means she depicted "the treatment accorded to this helpless class of our population,"<sup>526</sup> while furthermore for this reason pointing out who this helpless class consists of – namely women and immigrants. Thereby her account fell in line with Pulitzer's rearrangement of his paper. The mission statement of the *World* from May 10, 1883, the day Pulitzer bought the paper read: "Never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news. Always be drastically independent. Never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty."<sup>527</sup> The success of the *World* was based on appealing to the poor who were often newly arrived immigrants, as the article itself suggested. Bly therefore not only relayed what was happening on Blackwell's Island, an island in the midst of the East River only accessible by small ferries, she also told the story of immigrants through her self-writing, as "only one thing was decided upon, namely that I should pass under the pseudonym of Nellie Brown."<sup>528</sup> Bly wrote that she had to take on this name and stated in the preceding pages that she added "a little accent." Pulitzer's *World* "appealed to a multi-ethnic, cross-class audience,

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Bly, "Behind Asylum Bars," 20.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>527</sup> John L. Heaton, *The Story of a Page, Thirty Years of Public Service and Public Discussion in the Editorial Columns of The New York World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1913).

<sup>528</sup> Bly, "Behind Asylum Bars," 20.

especially” as Lutes pointed out and attempted to “speak to the needs of the most vulnerable members of urban society: immigrant, women, the working poor, even the barely literate.”<sup>529</sup> At the same time this newspaper investigation catered to the appearance of another emerging group. The philanthropists of the early nineteenth century increasingly “made it their business to involve themselves in other people’s lives, health, nutrition, housing”<sup>530</sup> and Pulitzer’s orientation to a new readership was intertwined as a consequence with his newspaper businesses. Bly’s practice of writing, which relied on her self-fashioning, dialogues and dramatic tone, circumscribed as a ‘plain narrative,’ thereby provided an interest for three different groups of readers – immigrants, women, and philanthropists. The intertwining between the economical needs of newspaper businessmen and the social needs of women and immigrants becomes even more apparent in the second part of Bly’s article published a week later that focused on the Lunatic Asylum itself.

### 3.4. “What is this place?” Inside the Madhouse on Blackwell’s Island

“Behind Asylum Bars” the first article published on October 9, 1887 ended with a cliffhanger. There were two ferries, one that shuttled from New York City to the south of Blackwell’s Island, with its landing next to the Charity Hospital and another one next to the Store Headquarter, between the Male Alms House and the Work House. Both landings were in the West Channel of the East River. The Women’s Lunatic Asylum was at the north of the island. Bly’s 1887 article upended the medical gaze, as I will show in this chapter. In addition, Bly’s self-writing focused on and probed into the hidden spaces of the cities, that lay, like Blackwell’s Island, in plain sight of Manhattan but where only wardens, physicians, nurses, priests, patients, and sometimes journalists would ferry over to. This island had a “monumental physical presence of a dense network of public institutions in close proximity – Alms House, prison, Lunatic Asylum, Work House, hospitals,” which according to Eric Monkkonen “invited the working poor to ‘read’ the functions of these buildings as interchangeable.”<sup>531</sup> The public needed passes from the civic authorities to cross over to Blackwell’s Island, therefore newspaper accounts of what happened on the island were eagerly anticipated by newspaper readers. Most New Yorkers thus might have wondered what happened on this island, stretching from approximately 47th to 86th Street in Manhattan, which was only 200 meters away. Bly asked a question on behalf of New Yorkers, turning to

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<sup>529</sup> Lutes, “Into the Madhouse,” 241.

<sup>530</sup> Michael Foucault, “Questions on Geography,” in *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books 1980), 62.

<sup>531</sup> Eric Monkkonen cited in: Gunja SenGupta, *From Slavery to Poverty, The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840–1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 97.



a “man who had his fingers sunk into the flesh of my arm: ‘What is this place?’”<sup>532</sup> The guard replied that this was “Blackwell’s Island, an insane place, where you’ll never get out of.”<sup>533</sup>

Bly uses dialogue form in her article to first, describe and dramatize what was about to happen to her as she arrives, and second, she put to the forefront the dense network of public institutions, transferring the visual chaos of 1880s Manhattan into an understandable, simple language. She was the last to get off the boat and it “seemed to require a man and a woman to lead me up the plank to reach the shore.”<sup>534</sup> She left the readers with the impression of her being “shoved into the ambulance”<sup>535</sup> and that she “was swiftly driven to the Insane Asylum.”<sup>536</sup>

In 1883, the year the Brooklyn Bridge opened, New York was not merely a bigger city than it had been at midcentury, but a fundamentally different one. It had changed from a bustling but compact port to an expansive, internally segregated metropolitan area: a landscape whose specialty districts, monumental architecture, and avant-garde infrastructures mobilized capital, goods, and people with unprecedented efficacy. Along with great achievements, this transformation had produced a nexus of spatial and social frictions: sclerotic congestion, chaotic land use, dilapidated structures, and a new-built landscape of tenements and workshops alien to the values and oversight of the urban bourgeoisie. Both the dynamism and the disorder of nineteenth-century capitalism were inscribed on the built environment of Manhattan and the city-building process that recast it.<sup>537</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, New York City had changed fundamentally in the course of a couple of decades. Urban transformation “had produced a nexus of spatial and social frictions,” of which the medico-legal professionalization – and with it the treatment of the working-class poor, convicts, immigrants, and the patients confined on Blackwell’s Island – were a part.

Bly’s self-writing practice fitted neatly into the *World’s* new journalistic approach on various levels, as we have seen. Blackwell Island’s Women’s Lunatic Asylum had been in the newspapers for quite some time, but the conditions in the facilities did not change. The Department of Public Charities and Correction was the civic institution that supervised the asylum on the island. Unlike the newspaper reports about the asylum, or the report of the Department of Public Charities and Correction, Bly used the narratives and terminologies of drama and mystery to visualize the treatment of the patients. In other words, Bly offered a translation of the practices in the asylum, something that – at least in the case with the *Department* – was previously only presented to a very small group of people belonging to the

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<sup>532</sup> Lutes, *Nellie Bly*, 50.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> David M. Scobey, *The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 2.

New York Board of Commissioners of Public Charities and Correction. This *Report of the Resident Physician of the New York City Lunatic Asylum*<sup>538</sup> was an annual report of the responsible medical superintendent. The report listed only eight residents on the island including the medical superintendent R. L. Parsons, three assistants, one warden, one matron, one apothecary, and one chaplain. Two non-residents were mentioned in the report as well: a special pathologist and another chaplain. These ten staff members cared for 1,165 patients in the asylum, of which only 27 were male. The fatality rate was high, 98 female patients died in one year.

Bly's second article, "Inside the Madhouse,"<sup>539</sup> gave a vivid account and visualized the bare numbers of this report by writing about the harsh conditions in the asylum. For instance, during an examination in the hall of the asylum she used a self-description of her body and the bodies of other inmates again: "How we shivered as we stood there! The windows were open and the draft went whizzing through the hall. The patients looked blue with cold, and the minutes stretched into a quarter of an hour."<sup>540</sup> While her description already gave the public a clear picture of the conditions, she furthermore emphasized it with the dramatic description that she "looked at the poor crazy captives shivering,"<sup>541</sup> shouting to a warden "[i]t's horrible brutal."<sup>542</sup> Throughout the rest of the article the depictions of her body and the bodies of the other patients were readdressed time after time. Thereby she was able to depict not the assumed madness of the patients but the inadequacy of the medical profession and the civic institutions in their social interaction with mainly working-class immigrants who were often associated with accounts of madness. Sometimes the patients' madness turned out to be just their lack of speaking English, as Bly described through her portrayal of Louise Schanz, a German immigrant, who was "consigned to the asylum without a chance to make herself understood."<sup>543</sup> Bly added that she was incarcerated "most probably for life behind asylum bars, without even being told in her language the why and wherefore,"<sup>544</sup> ending her portrayal of Schanz again with a reference to her bodily expression: "Mrs. Schanz begged in German to know where she was and pleaded for liberty. Her voice broken by sobs, she was led unheard out to us."<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> New York Historical Society, Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, Annual Report of the Medical Superintendent of the New York City Lunatic Asylum (New York: Bellevue Press 1875).

<sup>539</sup> Nellie Bly, "Inside the Madhouse," *New York World*, October 16, 1887, in Lutes, *Nellie Bly*, 56.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

<sup>541</sup> Bly, "Inside the Madhouse," 56.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

Bly was not the first person that addressed accounts of madness. Madness was part of English literature since a book regarded as the earliest autobiography written in English language came out as early as 1436. With *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe, madness became an autobiographical topic. Kempe gave a description of her “violent descent into madness as well as the breakdown of a woman she later visits.” She later referred to herself as “this creature”<sup>546</sup> inventing another persona to separating herself from the actions she perceived to be an account of madness. But only with the rise of the medical profession as an authority over normative articulations in the second half of the nineteenth century the boundaries between reason and unreason, between valid and invalid experience, normal and abnormal behavior were shaped and, as a consequence, people institutionalized, studied, and utilized to show what was meant to be normal.<sup>547</sup> There were other reports on mental asylums and the incarcerated “insane poor” by women before Bly’s newspaper article. Dorothea Dix wrote *On Behalf of the Insane Poor*, which was published in 1843. Dix was a social reformer and visited almshouses and insane asylums to report on the plight of mentally ill women and men. Dix’s writing was informed by “stark portraits of abuse [that] ultimately led to the creation or expansion of dozens of mental hospitals in the United States and abroad,”<sup>548</sup> of which the Women’s Lunatic Asylum in New York City was one. In 1852 Ray Isaac, an American psychiatrist and one of the founders of the discipline of forensic psychiatry, published the article “The popular feeling towards hospitals for the insane” in the *American Journal of Insanity*.<sup>549</sup> Isaac believed that the public:

supposed that the patients are not treated with invariable kindness; that the management is harsh and cruel; that obedience is enforced by lows or rough; that refractory conduct is by the discipline of shower baths, or confinement in dark dungeons; that they are neglected when sick; that they have improper and insufficient food; that their friends are not allowed to visit them; and finally, that to favor the schemes of interested relatives, persons are deprived of their liberty under a mere pretense of insanity. Besides all this, there exists a general and indefinite prejudice that does not pretend to any foundation in fact or reason but none the less bitter on that account.<sup>550</sup>

John McDonald one of the physicians involved with the design for the Women’s Lunatic Asylum, which opened in 1839, suggested that the asylum be built free of barricades and iron bars, but the model asylum was never constructed, due to financial constraints.<sup>551</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century Dr. Thomas Krikbride admitted that the “popular feeling” of “a general prejudice” of the asylum was, in contrast to Isaac’s account, somewhat appropriate.

<sup>546</sup> Rebecca Shannonhouse, *Out of Her Mind, Women Writing on Madness* (New York: Random House, 2003).

<sup>547</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: The New Press 1998), 335.

<sup>548</sup> Shannonhouse, *Out of Her Mind*, 8.

<sup>549</sup> Ray Isaac, “The popular feeling towards hospitals for the insane” in *American Journal of Insanity*, 1852, V.9.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Samantha Boardman, George J. Makari, “Images in Psychiatry, The Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island and the New York Press” *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 164, Issue 4 (April 2007): 581.

He found that convicts from the penitentiary on the southern tip of the island were used as guards and attendants and the patients were thus “abandoned to the tender mercies of thieves and prostitutes.”<sup>552</sup>

Newspapers were filled with stories about the asylum’s patients. The *Times* and *Harper’s Weekly* ran weekly accounts and “grim tales of madness, mistreated patients, wretched conditions, and wrongful confinement,”<sup>553</sup> as for instance with the 1879 article titled “Tormenting the Insane.”<sup>554</sup> Although these articles were fueled by dramatic depictions and offered a sensationalist approach as well, Bly’s self-writing practice in contrast offered a different approach. Unlike the social reformers, physicians, and other journalists, Bly went to the asylum by feigning insanity, which was a key factor in her self-writing practice. While mid-nineteenth social reformer Dix informed the Massachusetts legislature “of the deplorable conditions women endured at institutions throughout the state,”<sup>555</sup> Bly was sent by the *World* to uncover the conditions at one specific asylum, questioning thus the legal system as well. Her story was told as a “Successful Impersonation of Insanity,” as the first article’s subheading mentioned. In the succeeding article, “Inside the Madhouse” from October 16, 1887, the subheadings’ tone was as well dramatized as a “Continuation of the Story of Ten Days With Lunatics,” addressing openly the “Terrors of Cold Baths and Cruel, Unsympathetic Nurses,” the “Attendants Who Harass and Abuse Patients and Laugh at Their Miseries,” and “How the City’s Unfortunate Wards Are Fed and Treated.” The style of language between the *Harper’s Weekly* and the *World* stories about asylums was not that different. But Bly in contrast wrote a first-person account that focused on the visualization of her body’s movement and the movements of other patients. Combined with her feigned insanity, she, on the one hand questioned the professionalism of the medical authorities, and, on the other hand, positioned herself as a professional journalist. As a consequence, it was her account that led to extensive administrative changes in the asylum.

The newspapers of the burgeoning mass-press sector became interested in the emancipation of the woman – however, not for the sake of the female emancipation *per se*, as we have seen. In fact, “[t]he great issue battled over in *The World*, as well as in *The Sun*,” was the ‘new woman’ who had been emancipated and had entered business, professions and athletics.”<sup>556</sup> It was the *World* that had only recently started to issue a *Sunday World* edition in

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Boardman, Makari, “Images in Psychiatry,” 581.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Shannonhouse, *Out of Her Mind*, 8.

<sup>556</sup> Sidney Kobre, *The Yellow Pages and Gilded Age Journalism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University 1964), 50.

which both articles appeared. In the *Sunday World* “daily news was somewhat restricted”<sup>557</sup> and led the editors to new approaches and experimentations in their articles, as they needed to “attract old and new readers – men, women and children.”<sup>558</sup> Bly anticipated this and knew exactly how to fit in this setting, which she ultimately used for her own gains. She made “her big break by completing an assignment for the *World* that, her editor admitted, seemed nearly impossible.”<sup>559</sup> This did not mean, quite to the contrary, that she did not care about what she wrote, neither was the article about the asylum met with no consequences. Depictions of water boarding, beatings, chokings, broken ribs, drug overdoses, rotten food, and people dying materialized before the readers’ eyes. Bly uncovered hidden spaces and practices in the asylum through quoting inmates, as for instance with Mrs. Cotters’ story about the so-called retreat in the asylum, which was a place where violent patients were housed:

The remembrance of that is enough to make me mad. For crying the nurses beat me with a broom-handle and jumped on me, injuring me internally so that I will never get over it. Then they tied my hands and feet and, throwing a sheet over my head, twisted it tightly around my throat, so I could not scream, and thus put me in a bathtub filled with cold water. They held me under until I gave up every hope and became senseless. At other times they took hold of my ears and beat my head on the floor and against the wall. Then they pulled my hair out of the roots so that it will never grow in again.<sup>560</sup>

The newspaper’s battle for attention was as well a battle with city authorities, with uncovering hidden spaces like the asylum on Blackwell’s Island, and the treatment of the patients therein, that often were recently arrived poor, illiterate immigrants as Bly showed.

When Bly highlighted the encounters with other patients in the asylum and depicted their body movements, as well as her own, she translated for a broad readership the reality of the conditions on the island, or to be more precise her self-writing was able to epitomize the discursive realities that were shaped in the medico-legal system. For instance, she wrote, “in spite of the knowledge of my sanity and the assurance that I would be released in a few days, my heart gave a sharp twinge”<sup>561</sup> further emphasizing that she was pronounced “insane by four expert doctors and shut up behind unmerciful bolts and bars of a madhouse!”<sup>562</sup> This was aligned with descriptions of taking away the bodily integrity of the inmates by the staff. The readers were informed about the medical examinations, and how “patients looked blue with cold”<sup>563</sup> she inserted further observations of “the poor crazy captives shivering”<sup>564</sup> how her

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>559</sup> Lutes, Introduction, XVIII.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>562</sup> Lutes, *Nellie Bly*, 52.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

“teeths chattered and my limbs were goosefleshed and blue with cold”<sup>565</sup> when she was bathed against her will. The newspaper reader learned about the practices of the medical staff, which were not known to the public. Reports were written about the conditions only for the Department of Public Charities and Correction, but Bly added other layers of description by using dialogues, bodily utterances, reoccurring patients, and violent behavior of the staff.

#### 4. Conclusion

Bly’s self-writing was aligned with the sensationalistic journalism of its time, as we have seen. In Bly’s case, with a focus on her self-writing practice, we see how this sensationalistic approach relied on the observation of body movements. She once and again stressed her and the other patients’ bodily utterances. The mystery of the insane asylums was a popular cultural phenomenon at least from the middle of the nineteenth century onward.<sup>566</sup> Short stories like “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” by Edgar Allen Poe were highly popular in the United States.<sup>567</sup> These stories were culturally aligned with the redefinition of poverty by social reformers and physicians alike, who embraced the idea that “the solution to the ‘moral’ crisis of pauperism lay, instead, in institutionalizing the destitute in specialized institutions like alms houses and poorhouses, orphanages and insane asylums.”<sup>568</sup> These institutions were divided into public or private, sometimes semi-public ownership. As for Blackwell’s Island Women’s Lunatic Asylum it was under the control of the city and within the Department of the City Government it was known as the Commission of Charities and Correction. The island was property of the City of New York and one could not get onto the island without permission from these authorities.<sup>569</sup> Bly as a consequence visualized a space where poor women, migrants, and women of color were held captive. Sometimes, as we came to know, women were incarcerated simply because they did not speak English. She was able to visualize the city-controlled space of the island, with its asylum by addressing her bodily movements as presented in and through her writings.

Bly’s self-writing practice translated publicly unseen reports into a vivid narrative with ever-more harrowing depictions of the island and the inmates of the asylum. As a consequence, she channeled and defied the fictionality of the medico-legal discursive system

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>566</sup> John Cleman, “Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense,” in *Bloom’s BioCritique: Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (Philadelphia: Chelsea House 2001).

<sup>567</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” in *Graham’s Magazine*, November 1845.

<sup>568</sup> SenGupta, *From Slavery to Poverty*, 74.

<sup>569</sup> Ernest Ingersoll, *A Week in New York, Illustrated Guide to the American Metropolis* (New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1891), 279.

with its predominantly medical gaze – which was a male gaze – on women through her writing and explicitly by writing a self into the articles. Bly used a language and techniques that originated from fictional writing – narratives and terminologies that were close to the genre of drama and mystery in literature, as for example suspension, plot twists, and cliffhangers, while epitomizing again and again the sinister sides of gender politics at work in the late nineteenth century. She mixed these genre elements with depictions of her emotions and that of other inmates, and developed thereby a self in public, in the mass media press, for everyone to follow. In fact, Bly scripted an identity in public that would be a discernable and viable subject position for women, as it on the one hand showed working-class women's situation in an urban society like New York City, and on the other hand an agency to fight for a change within this harrowing network of experts and places. She did so by devising a plot in her articles that featured as a starting point a protagonist to identify with, which was often herself, or a group of women, or an unknown reader's letter of a girl that asked for help. Men were sinking their fingers into her flesh on Blackwell's Island, she told the reader in her article, for instance. In this way, her self-writing was unique because it adapted a space of male productivity, language, and symbols that she appropriated for her own needs, and thereby subsequently dragged gender politics into the mass press and onto the front pages.

## Part III

### Self-writing in a fictional autobiography

#### 1. Introduction

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far along the way, thou who has by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path we pray, lest our feet stray from the places, our god, where we met thee, lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee. Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand true to thee, o God, and true to our native land. We truly give thanks for the glorious experience we've shared this day.<sup>570</sup>

When Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, a pastor and civil rights activist, gave the benediction at the Inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009, these were his first words. Most attendees at the Inauguration most likely recognized the poem, as it had been sung on countless occasions for over a hundred years, everywhere in the United States. It was, with the exception of the last sentence, the third stanza of what is most commonly now referred to as the Black National Anthem. Fewer people might know the origin of the anthem-turned-poem, which was powerfully presented by Lowery for Obama's Inauguration. James Weldon Johnson originally conceived the words – as a poem – in 1900, for the commemoration of Abraham Lincoln at Stanton School, in Jacksonville, Florida.<sup>571</sup>

Originally, the song was meant to be a poem on Lincoln, as there was yet to be written a great poem on Lincoln by a black man, as Johnson remarked in his autobiography, *Along This Way*.<sup>572</sup> He tried to pursue this goal, but eventually deemed his undertaking to be fruitless – he “couldn't net” the poem.<sup>573</sup> Johnson, at that time principal of the segregated Stanton School, then transferred his original idea into lyrics for a song, which in the end became “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” His brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, set music to the song, which was then taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred black school children for the festivities. Over the next twenty years the song spread and was sung all over the South, as well as in other parts of the country.<sup>574</sup> Johnson's first biographer Eugene Levy wrote that “[n]one of Johnson's personal tensions and doubts about the future of the race, none of the era's racial problems, are overtly articulated in the anthem,”<sup>575</sup> while a later biographer posited that the

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<sup>570</sup> “The Benediction at the Inauguration of President Obama on January 20, 2009,” Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, accessed August 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb2UJ6r1A3E>

<sup>571</sup> Sondra Kathryn Wilson, *James Weldon Johnson Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 109.

<sup>572</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 153.

<sup>573</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 153.

<sup>574</sup> Sondra Kathryn Wilson, *James Weldon Johnson Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 109.

<sup>575</sup> Levy, *Black Leader*, 73.



lyrics looked “back to the hardships faced by the race in the past.”<sup>576</sup> Doubtless the song conveys dark images of the African American experience, while at the same time having a powerful and uplifting message, as analyzed later in the main chapter. But what is even more important for this chapter on Johnson’s self-writing practice is that within his songwriting, we already encounter a few of Johnson’s basic writing techniques, that he later adapted for writing about black identities in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (*AECM*).

Many literary scholars have analyzed *AECM* from various angles since the late 1990s, and *AECM* has, to a lesser extent, been identified as an important text for historians as well. But for the history of the practice of self-writing, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a text whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Johnson produced a text full of literary power, which helped to imagine an alternative space of black subjectivities, as we will see already in the first reviews in the following chapter. Johnson – with *AECM* – called into question not only modern literature in the United States, but also the historicity of identities and subjectivities in general. *AECM* was, moreover, a text that exemplified the fictionality of race, class, and gender. In addressing the fictionality of these categories of differentiation, Johnson extrapolated the everyday reality of the power of fiction. Putting to the foreground the tension between reality and fictionality in the history of subjectivity, then, allows for a more nuanced and complex reading of African American identities at the turn of the twentieth century. Before illustrating the relationship between the practice of writing and identity appropriation, and the specific questions this chapter will foreground I will shortly introduce Johnson, his relationship to New York City, and *AECM*’s plot.

Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871 to a freeman, James Johnson, from Richmond, Virginia, and to Helene Louise Dillet, from Nassau, in the Caribbean Sea. Besides his songwriter talents, he was a multitalented person; he was as a poet, novelist, journalist, critic, lawyer, diplomat, publisher, translator, librettist, anthologist, teacher, and English professor. In 1895, when he still was working at Stanton School as a teacher, Johnson founded *The Daily American*, one of the first daily black newspapers in the country. Although, the newspaper was published for less than a year, it brought to the foreground racial injustice and reported at large on issues of particular interest for the black community in Jacksonville. In addition, the paper also raised awareness of Johnson’s journalistic efforts and abilities. In fact, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, two renowned intellectual protagonists of turn-of-the-century America, became aware of Johnson’s writings via *The*

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<sup>576</sup> Robert E. Fleming, *James Weldon Johnson* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 44.

*Daily American*.<sup>577</sup> After *The Daily American* folded, Johnson turned his attention to reading for law and passed the entrance to the Florida State Bar in 1897, becoming the first black man licensed in that state by an open examination.<sup>578</sup> He subsequently moved to New York City in 1899, where he discovered, “an alluring world, a tempting world, a world of greatly lessened restraints, a world of fascinating perils; but, above all, a world of tremendous artistic potentialities.”<sup>579</sup> It is true; New York shaped his practice of writing significantly and took him and his writing into new directions. Partly because he was disappointed by his efforts to capture the African American experience in his songwriting, he turned to literature classes at Columbia University in order to become, as he later wrote, a “more serious”<sup>580</sup> writer. At Columbia, he started to conceive and write *AECM* in 1905, and he carried on with his manuscript throughout his diplomatic career, as a Consul for the United States in the Caribbean, in Venezuela and Nicaragua until 1911/12. Johnson had a wide and floating frame of experiences when he started working on *AECM*, more than most other African Americans at his time, which led to a new kind of *Autobiography*, but moreover to a new way of dealing with the African American experience, with black identities, through the practice of self-writing.

*AECM* was a new kind of autobiography for the contemporary readership because it dealt deliberately with the (im)possibilities of identity appropriation for African Americans in the United States in the style of a fictionalized autobiography. Johnson did not reveal himself as the author of *AECM*; it was sold to the public in 1912 anonymously. As I will furthermore argue, Johnson produced a unique self-writing practice that was able to obfuscate the very notion of identity and, thereby, called into question the structure and categories of racialized identities. Johnson’s *AECM* was, in this regard, a literary translation of Du Bois’s famous definition of the double-consciousness and its signature metaphor, the veil.<sup>581</sup> The metaphor of the double consciousness was drawn from the insight of the psychology of his time, as Du Bois’s professor, William James and his thoughts on the simultaneously existing consciousness in the structure of the brain, influenced him.<sup>582</sup> Exactly “this sense of always

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<sup>577</sup> “James Weldon Johnson’s Life and Career,” Herman Beavers, accessed December 11, 2016, [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/johnson/life.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/johnson/life.htm).

<sup>578</sup> Guide to the James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Paper JWJ MSS 49, Yale University Library Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>579</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 152.

<sup>580</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), 193: In this autobiography – written in part to distinguish it from his fictional work *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (*AECM*) – Johnson referred to *AECM* as his more serious work.

<sup>581</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

<sup>582</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: Bantam Books, 1989): XVII.

looking at one's self through the eyes of others,"<sup>583</sup> as Du Bois posits the African American experience of "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness,"<sup>584</sup> was captured in Johnson's novel, as we will see in the following chapters. *AECM* is thus not only of importance for literary studies, calling into question the rearrangement of the autobiographical genre through shifting away from slave narratives still popular at the time of its publication. But, moreover, it must also be recognized as an important historical source for subjectivation processes of African Americans in an urban setting like New York City, through a new unique self-writing practice.

Black American writing saw an unprecedented burst of fiction and poetry starting about 1877. This coincided with the time period in which immigration, urbanization and the Great War began to effect those changes in black life and thought, which later found expression in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.<sup>585</sup> Johnson, deemed by Dickson D. Bruce Jr. the most remarkable of any black writers in the early twentieth century, helped spawn a new black literary tradition in the United States.<sup>586</sup> There were many remarkable black writers at the end of the nineteenth century, ranging from such diverse authors as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ida. B. Wells, Frances E.W. Harper, and Anna Julia Cooper, to name just a few. These writers influenced Johnson, and his self-writing practice could hardly be read and understood without the influence of Booker T. Washington, Dunbar, and Du Bois. But, Johnson's practice of writing was chosen for this study because of his unique approach to black identity. It lingered in a space of fiction and reality that none of the aforementioned writers addressed as clearly as Johnson did. One of Johnson's key elements of his self-writing practice was that he deliberately used the genre of autobiography as his vehicle of agitation, through which he transported his ideas about African American identity and communities into popular culture. He was a writer, able to process and combine different writing styles from early on in his career, which would reach its full fruition with *AECM*.

The little-known company Sherman, French & Company published the novel anonymously in 1912,<sup>587</sup> and, upon its release it immediately put into question previously established narrative traditions of African American autobiographies.<sup>588</sup> Johnson's work

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<sup>583</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 3.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

<sup>585</sup> Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir, The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1989), 1.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>587</sup> According to Goldsby, Sherman, French & Company was an "obscure firm in Boston [...] not equipped to make *ECM* a mass hit," they "could print only a limited run of the novel; moreover, it lacked the funds to mount a national publicity campaign." Goldsby, *NCE*, XLVI.

<sup>588</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, introduction to the Norton Critical Edition (NCE) of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson (New York: Sherman, French & Company, 2015), XXIII.

broke with authorial norms of African American autobiographies, according to Goldsby, because of Johnson's use of several new literary techniques: an unnamed protagonist (the ex-colored man throughout the novel), an unknown authorship that challenged claims of omnipotence established by white authors, a lack of emphasis on the corporeality so embedded in the slave narrative tradition, and an antiheroic depiction of the main protagonist.<sup>589</sup> While black novel writing boomed after the Reconstruction Era, especially during the 1890s and early 1900s, Johnson deliberately chose to write, and later publish, *AECM* in the style of an autobiography.<sup>590</sup> Goldsby argues, that *AECM* was fictionalized as an autobiography for an important reason: The genre of African American autobiography was informed and shaped by slave narratives around 1900. And, according to Goldsby, slave narratives could not adequately transform African American identities and solidarities into textual representation. This is exactly why Johnson, as he fictionalized the genre of the autobiography, breaking with key authorial norms of writing, is of interest for this study; because he invents a new form of fictional writing that addressed the heterogeneity of black identities, as well as the problem of telling one's own story at the beginning of the nineteenth century as an African American through the genre of the autobiography. The historian's question then remains; in which ways could this new form of self-writing adequately transform identities into a textual representation, and in which ways is this literary achievement intertwined with everyday realities for African Americans at the beginning of the nineteenth century?

Most initial readers and reviewers read *AECM* at the time of its publication in 1912 as a genuine autobiography of a light-skinned black man who had successfully passed into white society. The novel begins with the narrator describing his early life at home with his mother. The nameless protagonist was born to a former slave mother and a slave-owning father. The father remains absent throughout most of the novel. The mother and the protagonist move from a small, unnamed town in Georgia to Connecticut in his childhood years. On his first day of school, the protagonist is singled out as a black student, exposing an externally applied category he emotionally rejects. The protagonist is immediately shunned, teased, and ostracized by many other students. This detail already indicates the novel's complex story of passing. Passing-as-white was a practice of fair-skinned black Americans at the end of the nineteenth century, sometimes to gain access to otherwise inaccessible economical spheres or to circumvent Jim Crow laws. In this novel, the racial violence the protagonist is exposed to depicts the racialization and segregation school kids were confronted with. Johnson's

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<sup>589</sup> Goldsby, *NCE*, XXII.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.* XXIII.

protagonist had no knowledge about the existence of a racial category system, but feels the embodied hatred of the teachers and pupils alike by singling him out as a black student, as well as being touted as a ‘nigger’ and ‘colored’ person. This incident early on in the novel is depicted as a traumatic one, which propels the narrator to begin to reflect on and understand societal differences between the races and what people think of each other. The protagonist learns about stereotypical descriptions of blacks in novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and makes the acquaintance of local black citizens in the South, where he travels to enroll at Atlanta University. He gives a piano concert in an effort to raise money for his college education, but the money he earns is subsequently stolen while en route to Atlanta. The protagonist becomes a reader for the workers in a Cuban cigar factory, a job that allows him to learn Spanish and to select stories from the newspapers to read to the labor force. The protagonist, having spent a few years in Jacksonville, then moves to New York, where he becomes involved with the ragtime scene, gambling, and cabaret, depicting a fashionable club in New York around 20th Street, where many African Americans and immigrants lived at the end of the nineteenth century. In New York, he also gets to know a white patron who pays him to play the piano. Together they go on a European tour, where the protagonist observes the cultural differences to American ragtime music and the social status of black Americans. He soon grows tired of Europe and realizes that he would “have greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer than as a white one.”<sup>591</sup> He returns to the United States via ship, on which he discusses the different historical stages of the “race question” with a former slave and a Texan white man. Back in the United States, he travels through many Southern, rural black communities, where he is often taken for a white man. One of the scenes that is often analyzed as a key scene in *AECM* entails the nameless protagonist witnessing a lynching in a town where his “identity as a colored man had not yet become known.”<sup>592</sup> He watches the lynching, which infuses him with a “great wave of humiliation and shame [...] that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country.”<sup>593</sup> The narrator’s journey ends with ruminations about what it is like for him to be addressed as a white *and* as a black man, ending with a remark that is perceivable on the one hand as bitter, while on the other hand and in a broader sense empowering, and which resonates with Washington’s theory of racial uplift. The “ex-colored man” ultimately chooses to be an “ordinarily successful white.”<sup>594</sup> From this passing-to-white viewpoint however he presents black Americans as “men who [are] making history and a race.”<sup>595</sup> The tension between the narrator’s depicted

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<sup>591</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography*, Goldsby *NCE*, 77.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*

perception and actions and the broader interpretation of the cultural and political fights of African Americans, as depicted in this short quote, are at the nucleus of what made this text uncommon for its contemporary readership. Johnson's purpose was to "convey to the reader a sense of the truth and reality of the story."<sup>596</sup> He therefore had to cast the story in a non-conventional form of fiction, knowing "that in the acceptance of the story as true lies its strongest appeal."<sup>597</sup> But, as we will see in the following chapter two, the regular questioning of *AECM* – if it's true or not – and more so, the answers given to that question, was deemed to be the strongest appeal upon its release. As a consequence, the importance of the relationship between fiction and reality, which is embedded in this very question, will be dealt with in the main chapter.

Before analyzing Johnson's practice of self-writing, the following chapter will therefore briefly discuss the various re-publications and, thereby, actualizations of *AECM* in the first half of the twentieth century. There have been three major editions: the original edition, which dates back to 1912, a 1927 edition, and a 1948 one. Each new issue had its own publishing history, which brought its own reviews and discussions to the foreground. It is important to differentiate the various *AECM* editions and to tie them back to the context of their publishing. As Goldsby has pointed out, many later readers referred for a long time to the 1927 edition,<sup>598</sup> missing the importance of the anonymously published first edition, as the 1927 edition was published under Johnson's name. Because the analysis of Johnson's practice of writing is undertaken here by focusing on identity appropriation around 1900, I argue that it is nonetheless necessary to briefly reflect on the differing circumstances in which *AECM* reappeared, and thereby the varying reviews, and with questionings it brought to the fore. By doing so, the analysis brings into attention different foci of interest in the text, from varying perspectives, and varying time periods. As a result, we see differences, as well as similarities, and continuous lines of thought in engaging with *AECM*.

In the third chapter, Johnson's self-writing will be addressed by focusing on the text itself as well as Johnson's correspondence in which *AECM* was the key focus. On a macro-historical level, the third chapter will show how the depiction of the literary self-identifications of the Ex-Colored Man was connected to normative racialization of black people in turn-of-the-century New York City. I will analyze Johnson's self-writing practice

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<sup>596</sup> Miles M. Jackson, "Letters to a Friend: Correspondence from James Weldon Johnson to George A. Towns," in *Phylon* 29, 2 (1968), 189.

<sup>597</sup> Jackson, "Letters to a Friend," 189.

<sup>598</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, "Keeping the Secret of Authorship: A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, eds. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 244.

with a focus on how it emerged out of his earlier journalistic, poetic, and lyrical works. The different genres he used in his self-writing practices, as for example ironic political commentary, arguments about the ‘race question,’ and what he called ‘conscious art,’ were all already present in his earlier work. Furthermore, I want to stress how Johnson used New York City as a metaphor for the historic restriction of movement of African Americans in the United States. This will be exemplified in – “*My New York was limited*” – space and place in *AECM*. Unquestionably, the notion of space is of importance for the construction, appropriation and literary depiction of a viable and perceivable subject position as an African American man in New York City. Johnson thus utilized the imagined space – and the real place – New York City, to depict the historicity of the restriction of African American movement. But, moreover, by writing about African American subjectivity in relation to space and place, he was able to transgress the historic restriction to a certain degree, as I will show by analyzing the three chapters in the middle of *AECM* that are staged in New York City. The last part of the third chapter briefly discusses Johnson’s depiction of the protagonist’s first realization of racialized categories. In constructing the protagonist’s ability to pass as white, Johnson not only dramatizes the fanatical artificiality of race categories but also singles out the fictionalized passing of the protagonist to depict what I call the racialized knowledge of the real.

## 2. Constituting an African American identity through fiction?

### 2.1. First *AECM* reviews from 1912/1913

One of the first reviews of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published in the *New York Times* on May 26, 1912, raised the possibility that the book was “merely the product of some whimsical imagination.”<sup>599</sup> Nonetheless, the unknown *Times* reviewer acknowledged that it “bears some evidence of the truth.”<sup>600</sup> It is not entirely clear what the *Times* reviewer believed to be imagination or the truth in *AECM*. Not only the *New York Times* doubted its truthfulness. The *New York American* also stated that the story might be fiction, because the plot was too well balanced, for their taste, to be real.<sup>601</sup> In fact, if we take a closer look at the *New York Times* review, the unknown author was not even interested in a firm distinction between reality and fiction, because “whether or not it is accepted on its face value, there remains the very interesting fact that it does make an astute, dispassionate study of the race problem in the United States from the standpoint of a man who has lived on both sides of it.”<sup>602</sup> Other reviewers followed in similar fashion, reviewing the first edition of *AECM* as an “unbiased discussion of the negro problem”<sup>603</sup> going to such lengths that the “rather unusual presentation of the matter”<sup>604</sup> might even “be a very important factor in the solution of the negro problem.”<sup>605</sup> Readers “indifferent to the race question” were even advised to read the book, because “it brings a new and an immediate phase of the subject into prominence.”<sup>606</sup> Another reviewer, again, was not interested in the distinction between reality and fiction, because it was a book of “singular power, whether truth or fiction.”<sup>607</sup> Johnson struck a nerve in contemporary readership; especially because the Ex-Colored Man’s hidden life was depicted in depth,<sup>608</sup> on the one hand, and because it, on the other hand dragged in its depiction of the passing story of the Ex-Colored Man something mysterious, unlawful, and perilous to the surface.

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<sup>599</sup> N.N., “An Ex-Colored Man, A Negro Who Passed as White Tells His Life Story,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1912, in Goldsby, *NCE*, 279.

<sup>600</sup> N.N., “An Ex-Colored Man,” in Goldsby, *NCE*, 279.

<sup>601</sup> N.N., “A Life Story You Will Not Forget,” *New York American*, June 8, 1912, in Goldsby, *NCE*, 281.

<sup>602</sup> N.N., “An Ex-Colored Man,” in Goldsby, *NCE*, 280.

<sup>603</sup> N.N., “Review of 1912 Edition,” *Chicago Record-Herald*, July 1, 1912, in Goldsby, *NCE*, 286.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> N.N., “Review of 1912 Edition,” *Christian Advocate* (New York City), July 18, 1912, in Goldsby, *NCE*, 287.

<sup>607</sup> N.N., “Review of 1912 Edition,” *Living Age* (Boston), August 17, 1912, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 290.

<sup>608</sup> E.M. Forster deemed the hidden life of characters as a signature specialty, and *AECM* explored an interiority that African American novels published before did not attempt. Goldsby, *NCE*, XXVII.



The unknown reviewer of the *New York Times*, as well as others, might have questioned the veracity of the *AECM*, whereas another distinction that was based on its intertwinement of fiction and reality was not questioned, the color line. Invoking the phrase “race problem,” the reviewer mentioned that the protagonist, the Ex-Colored Man, had lived on both sides of this problem,<sup>609</sup> signaling and at the same time acknowledging a binary logic of black and white that was part and parcel of what was called ‘the color line.’ The former slave Frederick Douglass shaped the term in 1881 in an article of the same name published in the *North American Review* indicating and challenging the existing racial segregation in the United States.<sup>610</sup> Historically, ‘the color line’ was always also a property line. Since the beginning of the economic exploitation of black people under chattel slavery in the 1660s, black people were not understood as people, but as objects, goods, of exchangeable value.<sup>611</sup> When Johnson wrote *AECM*, slavery had been abolished, “but its shadow still lingers over the country and poisons more or less the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic.”<sup>612</sup> Moreover, the “love of power and dominion, strengthened by two centuries of irresponsible power, still remains”<sup>613</sup> as Douglass pointed out thirty-one years before *AECM* was published and sixteen years after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. When, more than twenty-five years after Douglass’s contribution to *The North American Review*, Johnson began writing *AECM* in 1906, these words carried the same weight. The late-nineteenth-century United States saw “elaborate rituals of cruelty [...] staged to punish black men for alleged sexual crimes against white females [that] inevitably conjured up images of bloodthirsty medieval crowds gaping at hapless men and women being burned at the stake or broken on the wheel.”<sup>614</sup> Of course, elaborate rituals of cruelty existed in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras as well. The ‘color line’ was a life-threatening reality for African Americans in the United States after the abolition of slavery, and its historical structure and deployment over centuries was only possible through the all-encompassing and pervasive belief in the doctrine that nature “produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank.”<sup>615</sup> Thus, the invocation of the color line was born out of the discursive tension between fiction and reality. Following Barbara J. and Karen

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<sup>609</sup> N.N., “An Ex-Colored Man,” 280.

<sup>610</sup> Frederick Douglass, “The Color Line,” *The North American Review* 132 (1881).

<sup>611</sup> Gad Heuman, Trevor Burnard, *The Routledge History of Slavery* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>612</sup> Douglass, “The Color Line,” 573.

<sup>613</sup> Douglass, “The Color Line,” 573.

<sup>614</sup> Manfred Berg, “Lynching and the Ambivalence of Modernity,” in *Fractured Modernity*, eds. Welskopp and Lessoff, 155.

<sup>615</sup> Barbara J. Fields, Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft – The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 16.

E. Fields further, the concept of race was only deployable by “fitting actual humans to any such grid” as race, and thus “calls forth the busy repertoire of strange maneuvering that is part of what we call *racecraft*.”<sup>616</sup> Racecraft in the Fields’ sense is a kind of magical thinking that fixes and reiterates the imagination of races in authoritative narratives, such as eugenics, anti-miscegenation laws, and the one-drop rule. The unknown reviewers from the *New York Times* to the *Living Age* sometimes questioned the truth of *AECM*, but they also called it “a human document,” one that is able to tell uneasy truths, a fact that Johnson acknowledged, for he had written the book with that intention in mind.<sup>617</sup>

Apart from the debate over whether the book was fictional or not, the critics often referred to *AECM*’s tone. They recognized the book as a survey or a report, regarded it as almost scientific and applauded, for instance, its “unbiased discussion of the negro problem.”<sup>618</sup> Another topic of interest for the first reviewers was the notion of space — reiterating and pointing out the importance of the narrator’s journey through the Southern States, New England, and Europe. Both of these characteristics were the most discussed aspects of the book in its very first reviews. Brander Matthews wrote an extensive review of *AECM* called “American Character in American Fiction” for *Munsey’s Magazine* in 1913.<sup>619</sup> Matthews was a professor of Johnson’s at Columbia University and the person Johnson conferred with as he drafted *AECM*.<sup>620</sup> Matthews differentiated in his review between “dead stories of dead seasons”<sup>621</sup>— novels that might have been best-sellers in the past but that were only “vanished tales which left no palpable deposit on our memories”<sup>622</sup>— and examples of storytelling that survived “because they are something more than merely stories.”<sup>623</sup> He saw *AECM* to be part of the latter group. Moreover, he depicted the book as “a contribution to the history of American life and manner.”<sup>624</sup> Matthews described the book to be “unmitigably (sic) veracious” thus hinting to *AECM*’s fictionality without revealing it.<sup>625</sup> Without doubt Matthews understood his student’s book furthermore to be a “contribution to the history of American life and manners.”<sup>626</sup> To underscore his point, he referred to one of the first social

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<sup>616</sup> Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 16–17.

<sup>617</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 238.

<sup>618</sup> N.N., “Review of 1912 Edition,” *Portland (Maine) Express*, September 14, 1912, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, XXVI. Goldsby pointed out that Johnson’s novel breached allegory’s and melodrama’s narrative norms in clear, decisive ways.

<sup>619</sup> Brander Matthews, “American Character in American Fiction, Three Books Which Depict the Actualities of Present-Day Life,” *Munsey’s Magazine* 49.5 (August 1913), in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 294.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>625</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*

historians in the English-speaking world, John Richard Green, and his definition of what fiction is and is not: “History without documents — nothing to prove it.”<sup>627</sup>

## 2.2. *AECM*’s second edition in 1927

The quantity of reviews *AECM* saw in 1912 and the years thereafter was only one indicator that the book stirred an ongoing interest. When Sherman, French and Co., the publishing company that released *AECM* in 1912, went out of business a few years later, the high demand for *AECM* could no longer be adequately saturated.<sup>628</sup> Carl Van Vechten, a writer and promoter of African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance<sup>629</sup> whose own work was highly influenced by Johnson, convinced his publisher, Alfred Abraham Knopf Sr.<sup>630</sup>, to republish *AECM* for the Blue Jade series in 1927. The series was intended “to cover the field of semi-classic, semi-curious books which for one reason or another have enjoyed great celebrity but little actual distribution.”<sup>631</sup> Van Vechten wrote an introduction for the second edition of *AECM*.<sup>632</sup> Publishing at Alfred A. Knopf was a huge career leap for Johnson; although Alfred A. Knopf had only existed for twelve years, it already had earned three Nobel Prizes and one Pulitzer Prize. From 1918 onwards, Van Vechten was in correspondence with Knopf, transforming the publishing house into an important network for African American writers.

Most of the sixteen reviews gathered by Goldsby in the Critical Edition for *AECM* were from white newspapers, with only four from African American sources. In fact, most of these reviews were from Midwestern and East Coast newspapers and magazines; only one review was international (*The Times Literary Supplement*, London).<sup>633</sup> Three analytical frameworks captured the topics that constantly arose in almost all of these reviews: survey, tone, and space. The reviewers for the second edition found these characteristics for *AECM* in Van Vechten’s introduction. Van Vechten delineated *AECM* as a “composite autobiography of the

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid. John Richard Green’s *A Short History of the English People*, published in 1874, was one of the earliest accounts focusing on the social, industrial, and moral development of the working population, instead of writing the history of “great men.”

<sup>628</sup> Van Vechten, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 123.

<sup>629</sup> Van Vechten was also a renowned photographer who, from the beginning of the twentieth century, attended nightclubs where he listened to the performances of black singers and musicians. It was no wonder that his introduction not only ended with an observation of Johnson’s anticipation for the popularity of rag-time, but also with the statement that the “young hero of this Autobiography determines to develop the popular music of his people into a more serious form, thus foreseeing by twelve years the creation of *The Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin.” Carl van Vechten, in Goldsby, 123.

<sup>630</sup> Van Vechten’s also urged Knopf to published Langston Hughes’s poems under the title *The Weary Blues*. Van Vechten wrote the introduction for Hughes’s book as well.

<sup>631</sup> Goldsby, “Keeping the Secret of Authorship,” 265, FN 1.

<sup>632</sup> According to Harry Salpeter, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 305.

<sup>633</sup> Goldsby, *NCE*, 331.

Negro race in the United States in modern times,”<sup>634</sup> indicating that it might be something more than either an autobiography or a novel. One of the first observations Van Vechten thus shared in his introduction was that he found it to be more than either genre. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* “then stood almost alone as an inclusive survey of racial accomplishments and traits, as an interpretation of the feelings of the Negro towards the white man and towards the members of his own race.”<sup>635</sup> By invoking periphrases like “composite autobiography” and “inclusive survey of racial accomplishments,” Van Vechten thus framed *AECM* more as a scientific analysis of black communities in the United States, rather than fiction.

Quite often, second edition reviewers called upon historical, as well as contemporary, experiences of restricted access to space and movement for African Americans. They did so, for example, by addressing the rise of black Harlem between the years of the first and second edition of *AECM*. Harry Salpeter, a journalist for the *New York World*, titled his *AECM* review “Harlem 15 Years Ago.”<sup>636</sup> He pointed out the novel’s depiction of early-twentieth-century black communities around Twentieth Street as a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance. Before ending his review with a brief history on Harlem, however, Salpeter again, like the 1912s reviewers used the terminology of survey and tone, framing the book as more than an autobiography, hinting to its almost scientific quality. For Salpeter, *AECM* was as a consequence an “inclusive survey of racial accomplishments and traits, [...] an interpretation of the feelings of the Negro toward the white man and toward the members of his own race,”<sup>637</sup> but more than the earlier reviewers he combined the notion of the tone with an assessment of space. A couple of lines later in his review, he found *AECM* – in similar fashion to Van Vechten’s survey depiction – as a “tract and bald report in one,”<sup>638</sup> before turning back to Harlem – which Salpeter pointed out did not yet exist in the publishing days of the first *AECM* edition. It did exist – but in a different form. As Johnson later himself specified, Harlem only came into existence as a “city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world” in the 1910s, whereas the “story behind it goes back a long way.”<sup>639</sup>

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<sup>634</sup> Van Vechten, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 121.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid.

<sup>636</sup> Salpeter, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 305.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

<sup>639</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Harlem, The Culture Capital,” in *The New Negro* ed. Alain LeRoy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1925), 301.

### 2.3. *AECM*'s third edition in 1948

*AECM*'s third edition was released in 1948. The publishing house New American Library, a subsidiary of the Penguin Group, was established in the same year. Its focus was on reprinting classic and scholarly works as affordable paperbacks, a practice that was more common within pulp literature, and was, therefore, still being discussed and argued about in the following years.<sup>640</sup> *AECM* was now primarily reviewed in the African American press.<sup>641</sup> The importance of the three main foci in the reviews for the first and second editions: tone, survey and space, were not as important thirty-six years after the first publication and ten years after Johnson's death in 1938. A *Baltimore Afro-American* reviewer considered *AECM* to be among the ten best novels by and about colored people. Johnson's novel was nonetheless depicted as employing simple and convincing language and a wise selection of details that helped to build up a psychological concept.<sup>642</sup> The book's tone was pointed out again, but this time in a different way. Now, the reviewer was more focused on the aesthetics and the structure of the novel, than on a quasi-scientific survey or report that many of the first and second edition reviewers saw in *AECM*.

James Thomas Saunders Redding, a black novelist, teacher, lecturer, and journalist who wrote for *Harper's Magazine* and *Atlantic Monthly*,<sup>643</sup> was well connected within the African American community. He wrote one of the longer *AECM* reviews for *The Baltimore Afro-American*, in March 1949. Redding understood *AECM* as an "unusual [...]" approach to the complex of bi-racial living in America,<sup>644</sup> by which he referred to the novel's passing motif. He also wrote about a "detached point of view" within the narrative, suggesting once again that the tone was more fact-bound than emotionally charged. He found this point of view to be "still unusual in Negro fiction"<sup>645</sup> of the late 1940s. Redding further on described *AECM* as "more memorable historically than artistically"<sup>646</sup> – an argument that missed that the historically memorable impact could only be made by an artistically genuine strategic and innovative self-writing practice. Johnson's self-writing practice was, above all, artistically

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<sup>640</sup> The New American Library's Richard J. Strohn was invited as a speaker at "The Friends of the Brooklyn Public Library" meeting to discuss the publication of paperbound books at the beginning of 1955. See N.N., "Library Friends Hold Tea Today," in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 1, 1954, 19.

<sup>641</sup> Goldsby, in *Autobiography*, 333.

<sup>642</sup> Nick Aaron Ford, "Here Are the Ten Best Novels by and about Colored People," in: *The Baltimore Afro-American*, April 3, 1948, M3, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 333.

<sup>643</sup> Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation, A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2011).

<sup>644</sup> J. Saunders Redding, "Book Review," in *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 12, 1949, B9, in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 336.

<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid., 337.

genuine, and was therefore able, as Johnson put it in his own words, to produce a document that in the end was “stranger than fiction.”<sup>647</sup>

### 3. Self-writing as an African American Man

When Johnson began writing *AECM* in 1905, it was not long ago that the Fourteenth Amendment had been adopted (July 9, 1868). It addressed citizenship rights and equal protection of the laws. It guaranteed African Americans civil rights by national law, and political rights. Just one generation ago the system of chattel slavery was abolished, and subsequently new ways of undermining the rights of African Americans had been employed. As a consequence, writing as an African American man about identity was in Johnson’s case a kind of non-linear writing that traversed distinctions of past, present, and future intimately involved in a fictionalized autobiography.<sup>648</sup> Self-writing, writing about identity – whether directly mentioned or not – addressed the middle passage, as well as it was a present discussion of cultural differences and cultural feelings, and a forward-looking elaboration on how to deal with the present situation in the future.<sup>649</sup> Although slavery ended after the Civil War, slavery’s intricate system of exploiting and destroying African Americans bodies changed its shape and remained in different ways.<sup>650</sup> Moreover there were moments in which this direct legacy was challenged and its norms were upended, exploiting and destroying African American bodies came first through armed bands of “white men patrolling county roads to drive back the Negroes wandering about”<sup>651</sup> and later through the rise of lynchings and Jim Crow laws. How should one write about identity when African Americans were being murdered on a regular basis? One of Johnson’s answers was to pursue a career as a diplomat, thus striving for an elitist reputation, as well as financial and spatial safety that contemporary United States citizenship did not offer for most African Americans. Johnson could thus become a ‘serious writer’ on the other hand, which was based on a similar urge: the urge to “avoid the disagreeable business of traveling round the country under the conditions that a

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<sup>647</sup> The whole quote reads as follows: “The *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a document that reads more strangely than romance (or—stranger than fiction). But, it is more than a curious document.” James Weldon Johnson, “Letter to his first publisher Sherman, French & Company, New York City, February 17, 1912,” in *Autobiography*, Goldsby, 223.

<sup>648</sup> Doubtless *AECM* follows a linear timeline, from childhood to marriage. But, within the Ex-Colored man’s identity time folds into each of the depicted actions.

<sup>649</sup> The middle passage refers to the slave trade from Africa to the West Indies. Africans were densely packed onto ships, either lay chained on the floor, or on shelves, for about three to four months crossing the Atlantic.

<sup>650</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013[1935]), 1448.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, 1457.

Negro theatrical company had to endure.”<sup>652</sup> Johnson’s self-writing was, in addition, a conscious attempt to educate the broader public about African American history, identity, and community. Johnson chose the genre of the novel and developed a complex narrative structure to suits his aims. His self-writing consequently was a kind of bricolage of various genre styles combined that was already perceivable in his first musical and political writings, and by taking the Consular Service post, he could get away “from the feverish flutter of life to seek a little stillness of the spirit,”<sup>653</sup> and concentrate on his novel.

Johnson’s decision to publish *AECM* anonymously not only put the reality of race relations to the forefront, but also asked the question: What were the fictional realities for African Americans? I understand fictional realities to mean how an individual was able to think and perceive the world surrounding him in the first place. If we understand – on a macro-historical level – modernity as a “fractured” landscape “full of ruins of former times and permanently under construction,”<sup>654</sup> on a micro-historical level, the African American experience in the United States was one of fractured identities. This notion of fractured identities is closely related to the Du Boisian sense of the gift of second-sight; one was a:

sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>655</sup>

Johnson’s practice of self-writing was thus shaped by new literary techniques; he transformed the theory of double consciousness into the African American novel, branded as an autobiography. Johnson employed the notion of the antihero with the Ex-Colored Man’s passing story, from black to white, which he bemoans in the end. And as well in the depicted journey through the South of the United States, from Georgia to Connecticut to Florida and back to New York, and in the end passing the Atlantic, the formerly middle-passage in the opposite direction, so to speak, to Europe and back again; all these were narrative elements not seen and read before by a black writer. And, as *AECM* was published anonymously, people talked about the authenticity of the autobiography, as we have seen in the previous chapter. As a result, the decision to publish *AECM* anonymously put the discussions about the novel, and therefore the so-called ‘race question,’ in the realm between fictive and real account. Or, to put it another way, readers of the autobiography synchronized their

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<sup>652</sup> Johnson, *Along this Way*, 223.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

<sup>654</sup> Lessoff and Welskopp, *Fractured Modernity*, 2.

<sup>655</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

experiences of a racialized society with what was presented in the autobiography, and asked themselves, if this could be a truthful account, and if not, where are the lines that cross from reality to fiction. Johnson thereby exemplified a space that African Americans had inhabited since the first slaves were forcefully brought to the American continent, a mental state that propelled an all-encompassing and pervasive belief in the naturalness of races, or in the Fields' understanding of the racecraft process, that shows without racism there are no races. It was through employment of these techniques that Johnson was able to ask about the social and political realities of African Americans in New York City and throughout the United States.

### 3.1. Johnson's practice of writing before *AECM*

In Johnson's musical and political writings we can see that his early writings were intertwined different genres and ideas in order to circumvent white cultural hegemonical narratives. When we look at Johnson's writing career before *AECM*, one piece of writing stands out. The poem presented by Lowery at Obama's inauguration was part of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which was Johnson's most famous and circulated writing until the publication of *AECM*. It was one of the texts in which the techniques that also shaped *AECM* were already partly present. Johnson, as editor and manager of *The Daily American*, and as a writer, wrote in defense of the rights of women and men of color. He reported on things of interest for the black community. In contrast to his journalistic writing, his songwriting utilized an artistic approach that combined African American history with an uplifting and forward-looking quality. Both ways of writing unquestionably carried an educational attitude, as we will see. In this sense, Johnson's writings were quite different from the depictions of the black experience within the slave narratives of the nineteenth century.

In his autobiography, *Along This Way*, published in 1933, Johnson described the production of the song as an emotionally charged venture. He recognized in hindsight a 'Kiplingesque touch' in his lines – comparing his work to the Nobel Prize in Literature winner Joseph Rudyard Kipling, a white British short-story writer, novelist, poet and journalist who became famous for *The Jungle Book*, *Kim*, and *The White Man's Burden*, among other writings. Using Kipling as an example for his 'touch' is an interesting choice, and must be understood in the same tradition in which *AECM* made use of a writing practice that was able to depict the process of disidentifying. On the one hand, Johnson compared himself to Kipling, an author novelist George Orwell later described as a prophet of British Imperialism. On the other hand, Johnson refuted the British literary canon altogether in referencing Kipling, writing that he "knew that in the stanza the American Negro was historically and



spiritually, immanent.”<sup>656</sup> Johnson referred here to the already mentioned third stanza of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” And, because of the historic and spiritual immanence he detected in his poem, he “decided to let it stand as it was written.”<sup>657</sup> By referring to the renowned British author and repudiating him at the same time, Johnson made his readership aware of the historicity of white literary production. This is what we can gather from these remarks, and what we will later see in *AECM* as a much more elaborated writing technique. In the case of describing “Lift Every Voice,” Johnson used a white novelist as a foil, and intertwined him with the “American Negro,” or in other words with the African American history. Kipling was, therefore, reduced to a figuration of *the* white novelist. Johnson depicted the historical forms of subjectivity and identity that were only made possible by white men who “stole the songs, speech, and gestures of American slaves or free African Americans, as they profited by turning black people into infantilized monsters of stupidity,” as Greil Marcus once pointed out in his introduction to Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft*.<sup>658</sup> As a consequence, the immanence that Johnson writes about not only consists of African American history and spirituality, but moreover of the materiality of the body. The ‘emotionally charged’ venture Johnson undertook in conceiving the poem, and here especially the third stanza, was later mirrored by countless emotional performances of the song by school kids. It was almost always sung in a group setting, or as it was later transferred into popular culture by celebrities like Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, and Stevie Wonder, with a background chorus.

In “Lift Every Voice,” tales of religious redemption are recounted, although they are mixed with forward-looking and progressive ideas.<sup>659</sup> Johnson’s lyrics for “Lift Every Voice and Sing” drew – in contrast to *AECM* – on the style and traditions of slave narratives. Embedded in the more uplifting first and third stanza, the second stanza of the poem references an ephemeral hope, which relates to the emotional aspects of the slave narrative:

Stony the road we trod, Bitter the chast’ning rod, Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat, Have not our weary feet, Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come, treading our path  
through the blood of the slaughtered, Out from the gloomy past, Till now we stand at last, Where  
the white gleam of our bright star is cast.<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>656</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 155.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Greil Marcus, “Foreword to the 20th – Anniversary Edition,” in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) XI.

<sup>659</sup> The lyrics: “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on till victory is won” in the first verse, and in the third and last verse: “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way; Thou who hast by Thy might, Led us into the light, Keep us forever in the path, we pray.” Accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.poets.org/print/node/47804>.

<sup>660</sup> See lyrics accessed August 16, 2016 <http://www.poets.org/print/node/47804>.

Johnson addressed the black experience as a path “through the blood of the slaughtered,” recounting the “gloomy past” of black Americans in the United States.<sup>661</sup> Many black Americans – slave and free – although embracing evangelical Christianity, also perceived the hypocrisy between white Christians who prayed God’s words and their inhuman and cruel life conditions at the hands of the very same Christian slaveholders. Slaves’ religious practices in fact were most often answered with severe punishment by slaveholders. Therefore, many slaves prayed in secret in so-called invisible churches, building what was known as the “invisible institution.”<sup>662</sup> With this poem, “Lift Every Voice,” Johnson invoked the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Most often publicized by abolitionists, these narratives presented the reality of slavery for a number of former slaves like for example Harriet Tubman, Harriet Ann Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass.<sup>663</sup> “It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed,”<sup>664</sup> Douglass wrote, and it is exactly this easily accessible knowledge for African Americans, that Johnson refers to. At a time where the United States saw the numbers of vigilante murders of African Americans – after the Civil War – soar to unprecedented heights,<sup>665</sup> his lyrics went on to gain a life of their own. The song was soon sung in black communities all over the nation. “Lift Every Voice” went on to become one of the most cherished and sung songs across the country within only a couple of years, because it focuses on the emotions, or in other words on the materiality of the body, born out of the African American experience in the nineteenth century.

Johnson combined various genres in “Lift Every Voice,” from slave narrative fragments, as depicted above, to historical accounts of the contemporary black experience, in which the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, officially freeing African Americans from slavery, granting voting rights, and declaring their citizenship, were followed by a white backlash of violence and Jim Crow legislations.<sup>666</sup> As much as African Americans struggled “to become trade union leaders and

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<sup>661</sup> See lyrics accessed August 16, 2016 <http://www.poets.org/print/node/47804>.

<sup>662</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also the extensive “Guide to Religious Content in Slave Narratives” compiled by Marcella Grendler, Andrew Leiter, and Jill Sexton. Accessed January 11, 2016 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/religiouscontent.html>.

<sup>663</sup> Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, 1869); Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861).

<sup>664</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Dublin: Webb & Chapman, 1845), 107.

<sup>665</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret, Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>666</sup> The Thirteenth Amendment officially abolished slavery; The Fourteenth Amendment declared that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are American citizens; The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the denial of the right to vote regardless of a citizen’s race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

social workers, doctors and lawyers, engineers and architects”<sup>667</sup> in this racist environment, Johnson struggled to become a writer. The struggle to become a writer was partly and necessarily answered by skillfully appropriating white standards of expression and writing, because in order to get published as a songwriter he had to make concessions and compromises, as we will later see. It was obviously more than an appropriation of white standards of expression, as we have already seen in “Lift Every Voice,” where Johnson both captured the oppressive history of African Americans, but also shared the powerful notion of belonging, community, identity, and the changes yet to come.

The song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” stands as an example for the transformation of Johnson’s practice of writing as he began to realize “the importance of the American Negro’s cultural background and his creative folk-art.”<sup>668</sup> Johnson called his writing technique “the superstructure of conscious art,”<sup>669</sup> which he understood to have been reared upon African American cultural background and folk-art. With this “superstructure of conscious art,”<sup>670</sup> Johnson wanted to make “an attempt to bring a higher degree of artistry to Negro songs, especially with regard to the text.”<sup>671</sup> The path to producing a new kind of writing for Johnson was to address African American cultural and historical backgrounds on the one hand, and the contemporary realities of Jim Crow laws and popular culture that subjugated African Americans on the other hand. At the same time, he emphasized in “Lift Every Voice” a concept of an uplift ideology of racial solidarity and self-help.<sup>672</sup> But within this uplift ideology, Johnson’s writing also addressed the internally inconsistent ways in which African American subjectivity was subjugated by the laws of segregation, the popular culture of blackface minstrelsy, and the lynching of black Americans in the United States. The potentialities of Johnson’s practice of writing – that is, the strategic ways of dealing with the internally inconsistent ways in which black subjectivity was subjugated – are already discernable in Johnson’s early works. “Lift Every Voice” must, therefore, be understood as an important text in Johnson’s oeuvre, not only because it became the unofficial anthem of black Americans, but because it showed a unique writing technique that was later used for his novel

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<sup>667</sup> Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal, An African American Anthology, Second Edition* (Lanham: Littlefield Publishers, 2009) XXIII.

<sup>668</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 152.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid.

<sup>672</sup> The lyrics emphasized “we, our, us” in almost every line. Verses like “May we forever stand” and “True to our native land” emphasized racial solidarity, at once addressing the aforementioned historical and cultural background and a forward-looking stance. For an in-depth discussion of uplift ideology with regard to black intellectualism, see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

*AECM* as well. Despite the song's almost immediate success in circulating around the South, Johnson was utterly frustrated with what he perceived as the limits of what musical writing could actually gain with respect to finding new ways to communicate within and outside of black communities. He soon became fixated on the idea of becoming a "serious writer" in order to engage with the problems and possibilities of black subjectivity beyond black communities in the United States.

Johnson's biggest financial success as a songwriter came in the fall of 1902, when Marie Cahill, a white Broadway stage actress and vocalist, acquired one of the Johnson brothers' newest songs, "Under the Bamboo Tree." James Weldon Johnson's success in the musical scene at the turn of the twentieth century was based largely on his ability to rearrange common stereotypical depictions of African Americans; a skill he later adapted for *AECM*. "Under the Bamboo Tree" became Cahill's signature song and one of the most famous turn-of-the-century songs that helped spark a new genre of pop writing, the so-called "jungle song," in which similar stereotypes as in *The Jungle Book* by Kipling were employed.<sup>673</sup> The song implied common racial stereotypes that imbued African Americans with a wild, raw, and uncivilized assumed nature. Johnson's lyrics, as Levy has pointed out, "especially in the first few years, employed common Negro stereotypes."<sup>674</sup> Such stereotypes were used by Johnson in songs like "I Ain't Gwine Ter Work No Mo" and "My Castle on the Nile," referring to the stereotypes of laziness and effusiveness. Between the period 1900 and 1906, Johnson lived in New York and wrote lyrics for ragtime songs composed by his brother Rosamond Johnson and a third partner, Bob Cole.<sup>675</sup> They had to work for a marketplace that was dominated by white popular culture that disseminated a reification of black subjectivity through minstrelsy and vaudeville. Johnson wrote that this sometimes had "a choking effect on their voices."<sup>676</sup> To a certain extent, Johnson tried to alter the songs. But, also at performances, when his brother and Bob Cole performed songs like "All Boys Look Alike to Me," – a famous so-called 'coon song' by Ernest Hogan – for example, Rosamond Johnson substituted 'coons' with 'boys,' substituting a derogatory term for African Americans with the more neutral sounding one.<sup>677</sup> These were the tools of the trade that black artists and intellectuals used to gain access to white cultural productions. This rearrangement of popular songs barely changed the already inherent racialized fixed message, but was a reappropriation, to a certain degree, of black subjectivity. Yet, "black repossession of the means of cultural

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<sup>673</sup> Philip Furia, Laurie Patterson, *The American Song Book, The Tin Pan Alley Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

<sup>674</sup> Eugene Levy, "Ragtime," 362.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid. 358.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid. 362.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid. 362.

representation”<sup>678</sup> was, as Lott posits “a tragically halting affair,”<sup>679</sup> and especially “after minstrelsy [and] because of the nature of the national popular in America, there could be no simple restoration of black authenticity.”<sup>680</sup> Johnson nonetheless altered stereotypical framings of black people, and this was of importance for various reasons. For one, it determined whether one could make a living with music as an African American, specifically with ragtime music, as the genre had only emerged a short time before in New York City.<sup>681</sup> Johnson, for the sake of economic success, carefully chose which of the available stereotypes then in use for black people were applicable. He avoided “those which pictured the Negro as a razor-swinging rowdy or as a semi-human buffoon”<sup>682</sup> in favor of the “fun-loving aspect of the American Negro stereotype.”<sup>683</sup>

Johnson’s retained “the coon song format,”<sup>684</sup> but wanted at the same time to break “away from Negro stereotypes”<sup>685</sup> altogether. He “sought an empathy with the listener by emphasizing experiences and emotions common to the human race not those supposedly limited to the black man,”<sup>686</sup> a strategy that led to considerable success in “an area dominated by whites.”<sup>687</sup> With the success he had, Johnson gained the attention of another black intellectual, Booker T. Washington. Washington, who championed racial segregation in order to create a consumer market for black businesses, was impressed by Johnson professional songwriting skills. Washington was influential for Johnson’s career as a writer, asking Johnson to speak at a 1904 meeting of the National Negro Business League. Johnson wrote a paper for the occasion entitled, “The Composition of Music as a Business,” outlining how he engaged with white popular culture and thereby sharing his approach with a broader intellectual network. Johnson also wrote another piece called “The Negro of To-Day in Music” for *Charities*, a weekly magazine of the New York Charity Organization Society, where he gave “his high praise to those colored composers and performers whose music was least identifiably Negro.”<sup>688</sup> This indicated Johnson’s ability to write according to the recipient’s expectation, as much as it already shows his awareness of a double consciousness.

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<sup>678</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 107.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

<sup>681</sup> The depiction of ragtime music in *AECM* was one of the earliest literary depictions of the music scene and the locations thereof in New York City.

<sup>682</sup> Eugene Levy, “Ragtime,” 363.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid.

<sup>684</sup> Ibid.

<sup>685</sup> Ibid.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid. 364/5.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid. 365.

“The Great Accommodator,” Booker T. Washington, so nicknamed by W.E.B. Du Bois because Washington was popular with whites and “told them what they wanted to hear [...] praised American society and eased white fears of racial retaliation, while misleading his own people into lives of second-class servitude.”<sup>689</sup> In order to gain access to vaudeville theater, a kind of whitewashing of one’s heritage and history was necessary. Johnson, through his upbringing and educated background, had learned white Americans’ cultural go-to references that one needed to apply in order to be heard within white popular culture. Tropes within white popular culture not only emphasized race, but also class distinctions came to the forefront in accommodating the black experience to white hegemony. For instance, in “The Composition of Music as a Business” Johnson on the one hand praises black composers who made their mark with conventional classical music, which was stereotypically intertwined with white high-society culture, while on the other hand he does not mention ragtime-styled popular music and its composers. This obviously shows a “conflict between class identity and racial identity,”<sup>690</sup> as well as indicating a relationship to emotions. The emotional state Johnson thinks about is part of the self-writing practice. In writing lyrics and articles (and later *AECM*) the invocation, as well as the absence of, verbalized emotions – as depicted above – are a vehicle he deliberately uses in order to shift in his writings between various categories of difference. It is here, with the help of a transsectional approach, that we can see with the intertwining of categories of difference and verbalized emotions, as expressed in writing, the materiality of the body.<sup>691</sup> And moreover, and as a result, as well the importance of the awareness of one’s own body with its emotions, in a society that addresses African Americans as minor subjects.

Johnson thus translated his musical and political writings to yet another genre, writing for business purposes. The production of a small segregated school celebration certainly required a different approach, as it was easier to assert and refer to black identities, because Johnson did not have to appeal to a white audience that expected to listen to stereotypical depictions of African Americans. He did not have to align to white popular cultural narratives like the poor-but-happy black slave on the plantation, or to fictionalized figures that were common in minstrel shows like Jim Crow, Bones, and Tambo. These racist characters were depicted as comical figures with clown-like shoes, big eyes and noses, and hair out of wool and most often played by white men in makeup. Minstrel show characters were depicted as

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<sup>689</sup> Horace Randall Williams, Ben Beard, *This Day in Civil Rights History* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2009), 284.

<sup>690</sup> Eugene Levy, “Ragtime,” 365.

<sup>691</sup> Björn Klein and Felix Krämer, “Transsektionalität,” forthcoming in: *Doing Space, While Doing Gender* – *Vernetzungen von Raum und Geschlecht in Forschung und Politik*, edited by Aenne Gottschalk, Susanne Kersten, Felix Krämer (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018).

possessing little to no history, as existing without a cultural background, and as having an inborn musicality and inclination to dance. The racism was illustrated in the dehumanizing and reoccurring minstrel technique of depicting black children as little dogs. In minstrel shows, these figures were also accident prone, often knocked down by vehicles, betrayed, or otherwise hurt. These were the depictions of the blackface minstrel show, a national form of racist ‘art.’ The vaudeville theater plays of the late 1890s and the songs of contemporary musical comedies were heavily influenced by these depictions. The skillful navigation between the different expectations of black and white audiences for creative black writers was not something taught at colleges and schools. But this navigation was an essential skill African American writers had to learn. Johnson acquired these skills, partly, as we have seen through his experiences in songwriting and journalism, when he entered the musical scene in New York. When he moved to New York to make a living as a creative writer, he was faced with what he later called the dilemma of the African American author. The African American writer:

faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about – the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.<sup>692</sup>

It was already apparent in his early songwriting how Johnson was influenced by Du Bois’s theoretical idea of the ‘double consciousness,’ or to put it in other words, the fact that writers, as well as most other African Americans artists, had to deal with what Johnson called the ‘double audience’. Du Bois wrote about the double consciousness in 1903, describing it, as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of other, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>693</sup> Unlike the black writers who had fallen down between two stools, as Johnson phrased it, he dealt expertly with this doubling of thought within his writings, sitting on both stools as he saw fit. This was probably due to the advantage of an impeccable education that clearly helped him navigate the complex cultural scene he encountered in New York City, or in other words to skillfully navigate through various categories of difference. The black American experience that through the history of the *Black Atlantic* had shaped perception, thought, and consciousness of black subjectivity, was already inherent in his first poems, as well as within “Lift Every Voice,” but writing for this ‘double audience’ in New York shaped his perception of the

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<sup>692</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” in *The American Mercury*, 12, (1928), 477.

<sup>693</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1999.

‘double consciousness’ to a greater extent than ever before. Johnson, still in his early thirties, learned quickly to efficiently rearrange societal stereotypes in his lyrics to his economic advantage. But more than that, Johnson sought to find a way to ultimately change the perception of black subjectivity.

### 3.2. “My New York was limited” – Space and place in *AECM*

*AECM*’s unnamed protagonist’s movements through different spaces shaped the possibilities of his self-identifications. In this sense, the protagonist’s self-identification processes depicted here were bound to the history of African Americans in the United States. This chapter will explore the protagonist’s journey to and through New York, by analyzing a key scene in the three chapters that are staged in New York City. It will also engage with Johnson’s actual place of writing. Both of these lines of thought will then again connect to macro-historical processes of importance. Was the historicity of the aligned spatial circumscription and restricted physical mobility of African Americans defied by Johnson’s self-writing practice and the very act of writing *AECM* in the first place? How is this then aligned to New York as an imagined space and a real place? The history of African Americans in New York City as well as in the United States in general has always been a history of the struggles between confinement and freedom of movement.

The first Africans were forcefully brought to the English colonies in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. This was the start of the transatlantic slave trade, which transported at least fifteen million Africans against their will into the Americas and the Caribbean, leading to the subsequent institutionalization and expansion of mono-agricultural production that relied on forced labor and ultimately led to a new world settler society and economy that was based on the extermination of indigenous populations.<sup>694</sup> The history of black American and African American identity, and the self-writing practice, therefore, can only be understood in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and the “two-and-a-half centuries of chattel slavery – a structure of overwhelming inequality and brutality characterized by the sale of human beings and routine rapes and executions.”<sup>695</sup> As a result, notions of space and place cannot be underestimated for African American history in general and for the practice of self-writing in particular. In *AECM*, we can see how this history was taken up by Johnson and reworked with a mixture of Du Boisian theorizing and Washingtonian accommodationist thought.

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<sup>694</sup> Marable and Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, 4.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid. XXI.



Referencing Du Bois and Washington was exactly what Van Vechten did in *AECM*'s second edition introduction. Here he pointed out similarities and differences to other important contemporary black writers. One difference he pointed out with regard to Johnson's writing was how Du Bois's essays lacked the "insinuating influence of Mr. Johnson's calm, dispassionate tone, and they do not offer, in certain important respects, so revealing a portrait of Negro Character."<sup>696</sup> Van Vechten emphasized Johnson's accomplishments by comparing Johnson's work to that of Du Bois. But he was also invoking the history of the so-called "race novels" – the autobiographies written by former slaves. This again refers back to the reviews and the previously mentioned 'tone' in *AECM*. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1900) was also an obvious choice for Van Vechten to mention in his introduction to the second edition because of *Up from Slavery*'s wide-ranging influence in black communities and in the United States in general. Washington was a mediator between white state authorities and black communities and a proponent of economic self-help and self-reliance for African Americans in the United States. As founder of the Tuskegee Institute, Washington was also responsible for the recommendation of Johnson for consular service in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Washington not only influenced Johnson with his theories and ideas but, moreover, by his recommending Johnson for a diplomatic post in the Caribbean. He was thus partly responsible for the actual places where Johnson wrote *AECM*: Puerto Cabello and Corinto.

Johnson began writing *AECM* in New York, and finished it in the Caribbean Sea — more precisely in war-torn Nicaragua, where he took his second post as United States Consul after having served for the United States in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela for three years.<sup>697</sup> Charles W. Anderson was the political leader of New York State's black Republicans, as well as an advisor to Booker T. Washington, and was with good reason called a national power broker.<sup>698</sup> He was key in this career shift for the teacher-lawyer-turned-songwriter, Johnson. Anderson was one of the principal intermediaries through which Washington rewarded his friends and thwarted his foes.<sup>699</sup> In this position, he offered Johnson a post in the United States Consular Service. He did so mainly because of Johnson's activities on behalf of the Republican Party as President of the Colored Republican Club, though Johnson's established reputation and connection to Washington were also factors. Johnson was first stationed in

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<sup>696</sup> Van Vechten, in Goldsby, *Autobiography*, 122.

<sup>697</sup> See Brian Russell Roberts, "Passing into Diplomacy: U.S. Consul James Weldon Johnson and The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.2 (2010); Patricia Wiegman, "People on the Move: Reisen, Rassismus und Emanzipation zwischen den USA und dem karibischen Raum im frühen 20. Jahrhundert" (PhD diss., Universität Erfurt, 2014).

<sup>698</sup> Goldsby, "Keeping the Secret of Authorship," 248.

<sup>699</sup> Levy, *Black Leader*, 100.

Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, from 1906 to 1909, where he held a sinecure post even though he performed consular duties for Cuba, Panama, and France.

Johnson was promoted in June 1908 and subsequently transferred to Corinto, Nicaragua in April 1909, where Johnson was a key figure in the attempted overthrow of the Nicaraguan government, being the United States Consular Service representative. Above all, war, and war-like operations had – throughout U.S. history – a special meaning for identity construction. For instance, wartime military service was regarded as an obligation of male citizenship and rite of passage to manhood. In this sense the consular post, and probably this very incident, was an opportunity for Johnson to show that he was aware of basic assumptions of gender, race, and class, embedded in this post. This becomes in fact – although not directly addressed – fairly clear in his own words, when he depicts, how he dealt with the situation: “I had not asked for further instructions from the Department, because I had been in the Service long enough to learn that in certain phases of diplomacy definite instructions are not given, and an officer is valuable only so far as his ability to divine the main objects of his government goes.”<sup>700</sup> Clearly Johnson knew what the United States wanted. The U.S. government wanted to overthrow President José Santos Zelaya, because he “had been an energetic and capable administrator of Nicaraguan affairs, but his hostility to the United States had made him a thorn in the thumb of Department of State.”<sup>701</sup> Therefore Johnson in a sense embodied U.S. policy, proving not only his professional abilities, but moreover mobilizing an image of an American masculinity, which, however, was utilized to meticulously dissect various categories of difference through his practice of self-writing at the very same time.

For this reason, outlined in the above paragraph, the quiet hours Johnson envisioned writing *AECM* were over when Corinto came under gunfire in the rebellion led by Juan José Estrada of the Nicaraguan Conservative Party against President Zelaya of the Liberal Party in Nicaragua in December 1909. Johnson negotiated with both sides and coordinated his actions with the United States Navy. Nonetheless, while he was in service – even more so in Venezuela – he still found time to read, and write the manuscript for *AECM*. Johnson mentioned this in correspondence with his longtime friend George A. Towns in which he acknowledged that he had “lots of leisure time for reading and thinking” and – lacking research opportunities in the Caribbean – had brought with him “50 selected books” to Venezuela.<sup>702</sup> The places in which Johnson wrote *AECM* were New York City, Puerto

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<sup>700</sup> Johnson, *Along this Way*, 259.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid.

<sup>702</sup> Jackson, “Letters to a Friend,” 184.

Cabello, and Corinto, conversely the space in which he conceived his novel was squirming between leisure and an attempted military coup d'état. These places and spaces were important in facilitating the time and the financial stability to engage with the work for his first envisioned fictionalized autobiography. I will address the importance of these places briefly in connection to New York City as depicted in *AECM*, because this depiction was a key moment in African American writing. Along with Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, for the first time in African American writing, narration shifted away from Southern-based pastoral rural depictions of black identities.<sup>703</sup>

Writing *AECM* in the Caribbean, south of the United States South, reshaped Johnson's writing and helped him to refigure the black experience in the literary tradition. Johnson drew on his acquired skills as a teacher, lawyer, and songwriter. All of these skills were necessary for his work as United States consul and part-time novelist in the Caribbean. Johnson was at first reluctant when offered the post, but later considered it to be "a first step in an honorable political career."<sup>704</sup> It was an unlikely place for an African American to be a consul in the Caribbean, and as much as it was an 'honorable' political career, it was his chance to do the 'serious writing' he wanted to do. It was also an unlikely place for Johnson, not only because he was an African American in a diplomatic United States post, but even more so when we think of Johnson's efforts in writing operas that directly satirized, caricatured, and made fun of American imperialism only a couple of years before. Nonetheless, with his appointment as a consul he was able, as Patricia Wiegman has analyzed, not only to become the novelist he wanted to be, but also to become an intellectual civil servant in the eyes of the public, thereby changing the perception of what an African American could be in the United States.<sup>705</sup>

To better our status we have two tasks before us; one, to fit ourselves, the other, to prove to the great and powerful majority that we are fit. [...] In line with what I have been saying, I should like to see more colored men of the right sort holding office. Not only because it is our right as citizens to participate in the government and that it gives the race a standing in the eyes of the world at large, but it opens up the chance to convince the other fellows.<sup>706</sup>

Although Johnson even led the administrative organization of the naval war in Nicaragua during his employment as a consul, he had established a unique space for himself as an African American writer that assured him a needed financial income and the reputation he longed for. Both Puerto Cabello and Corinto, moreover, guaranteed the acknowledgement

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<sup>703</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, "The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in *African American Review* 38 (2004).

<sup>704</sup> Jackson, "Letters to a Friend," 184.

<sup>705</sup> Wiegman, "People on the Move," 60.

<sup>706</sup> Jackson, "Letters to a Friend," 186.

of Johnson as a United States citizen, something that often, especially in the Southern United States “in reality, was only little more than a feeling”<sup>707</sup> for most African Americans.

Johnson, as we already have seen, attempted to rearrange the depiction of popular racialized characters as Zip Coon, Sambo, Uncle Tom, Jim Crow, and Tambo in his early song writings. One way to avoid stereotypical depictions altogether was to write in another genre. Johnson’s decision to turn to more serious writing, which to him meant becoming a novelist and writing a book, gave him the chance to escape the limitations that song writing imposed on him. He exchanged individual words in traditional lyrics, not necessarily altering the meaning of the song, because the new words referred to additional coded ethnic descriptions, and racist and stereotypical constructions of black Americans that had been used for centuries in the literary tradition within the United States, as we have seen in the previous chapter. But these stereotypical figurations were shaped and propelled in an abundance of other writings as well. Ranging from novels to works of scientific racism that secured these stereotypes with so-called scientific facts such as genetic predispositions, to certain kinds of mental skills, to writings that helped popularize the idea of eugenics.<sup>708</sup> The association of an abundance of negative characteristics to an “inferior race” has an epistemic double<sup>709</sup> in the positive moral attributes linked to the category of whiteness. Whiteness as a racial category was inextricably linked to the project of Enlightenment philosophy.<sup>710</sup> One way to challenge the long lineage of racialized notions of African Americans, therefore, was to conceive of an African American protagonist within the city, and thereby open up a fictional space that was not literarily and epistemologically intertwined with depictions of African Americans in the slave South.<sup>711</sup>

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<sup>707</sup> Johnson, *Along This Way*, 301.

<sup>708</sup> These racialized figurations relied heavily on the scientific construction of masculinity, see Melissa N. Stein, *Measuring Manhood, Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>709</sup> Pablo Andersen Dominguez, “Film Stars and Discourses of Gender, Nation, and Race in Germany, 1918–1945” (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2013), 72.

<sup>710</sup> As Peggy Piesche has shown, it was Immanuel Kant who first formulated the concept of the white race in the 1770s. Peggy Piesche, “Der ‘Fortschritt’ der Aufklärung: Kants ‘Race’ und die Zentrierung des Weißen Subjekts,” in *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, ed. Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche and Susan Arndt (Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2009).

<sup>711</sup> Pastoral representations, i.e. romanticizing figures as happy-go-lucky, dangerous, and servile and dependent characters were to be found in the works of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, for example. Scientists like Francis Galton and Samuel Cartwright, amongst others, helped to shape the racialized fictions by use of medical expertise. See Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings, The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1911); Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887); Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1883); Samuel Cartwright, “Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” in *De Bow’s Review*, XI, (1851).

Johnson's New York differed from the New York presented in *AECM*. Johnson settled at the Hotel Marshall at West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street when he arrived in New York, where many "upper-strata member of the black theatrical group"<sup>712</sup> had moved after the turn-of-the-century, coming from the Tenderloin district in the West Thirties. The novel's protagonist, however, moved into a 'lodging-house in 27<sup>th</sup> Street in the Tenderloin,' exactly the area around the West Thirties, where many African Americans still lived around the turn of the century. The introduction of New York City in *AECM*'s narrative is important, because it already exposes the protagonist's ambivalent views of New York, and in doing so, Johnson opens up the space of the city for examination in relation to African American identities and communities. For this reason, the protagonist's move from the South to New York in *AECM* was preceded by the depiction of New York as a transit hub on the one hand, where he and his mother:

started on what seemed to me an endless journey" through "a large city – Savannah" where they "boarded a steamer which finally landed us in New York. From New York we went to a town in Connecticut, which became the home of my boyhood."<sup>713</sup>

On the other hand, the city appeared in connection to an emotionless farewell to his father who has "to go back to New York."<sup>714</sup> These brief, rather distant and transient depictions of New York City are the novel's only mentions before Chapter V ends with the protagonist's fever for New York City. A fever that follows the protagonist rejecting life in Jacksonville and rejecting the plan to marry a young school teacher, raise a family and work in a cigar factory for the rest of his life: "[F]or some reason, which I do not now remember, the factory at which I worked was indefinitely shut down. Some of the men got work in other factories in town, some decided to go to Key West and Tampa, others made up their minds to go to New York for work. All at once a desire like a fever seized me to see the North again, and I cast my lot with those bound for New York."<sup>715</sup> This literary depiction of a fever introduced readers to a well-known anticipation to which many turn-of-the-century African Americans could relate. New York City was known to African American and immigrant groups for its potentialities embedded in the myth of New York City as a harbor for freedom and economic independence. Johnson worked with this New York City mythology in so far as he used common stereotypical notions and symbols that signified freedom, such as the Statue of Liberty, in *AECM*.

New York was "the central point of American history," as historian Martha J. Lamb wrote as early as 1877 in her *History of New York City*. The end of the nineteenth century

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<sup>712</sup> Levy, *Black Leader*, 80.

<sup>713</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography*, 6.

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

adds another chapter to New York City's history. The city imagined as a place of opportunities intensified, partly because America began to emerge as a country perceived as where discrimination was intolerable and freedom promised to all who entered. This is exactly what France's gift of the Statue of Liberty in 1886 represented – democracy and freedom. The majestic looking woman, framed as a symbolic embodiment of nationhood, and with her the symbols of democracy and freedom, were for African Americans and others often exactly that, a symbol, rather than a reality. Nevertheless New York City was also a place in which desires of African American sociality and networks were fulfilled, wherefore many African Americans were keen on getting to New York City at the end of the nineteenth century. The city seemed to offer vast possibilities and its myth as the great metropolis, as Johnson once called New York City in *The Daily American*,<sup>716</sup> was perceptible almost everywhere in the country. Although Johnson once compared Jacksonville to New York City in *The Daily American* because of its assumed liberalism, New York offered, due to its economic, commercial and cultural influences many more possibilities. One of the first African American communities was established in 1825 when the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church laid out a farm community, which later became Seneca Village.<sup>717</sup> While, for the most part, working poor black New Yorkers lived among their European immigrant and native-born white counterparts, Seneca Village – which is now covered by Central Park – was an all-black neighborhood.<sup>718</sup> The places of African and later African American communities changed during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries to the most renown place of African American solidarity and community, Harlem.

For Johnson, as well as for many others, New York City was the place to start a new career. Johnson was not a working poor African American, but he was aware of the history of Africans in New York, as well as the history of African Americans. In regard to their history of confinement and movement through New York City, *AECM* offers a few references. For Johnson's protagonist it was the turning point, to opt against the decision to settle down and raise a family. Instead, the protagonist chose to travel and eventually become someone different than what was possible within the rural South. The city itself was, therefore, a foil and a territory to draw upon not only for migrants, but for novelists as well. It was a template able to propel stories into different directions. This is why the city was also important for African American literature. Whereas slave narratives still told stories of suffering and

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<sup>716</sup> James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Paper JWW MSS 49, Yale University Library Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut, BOX 90 Folder 718, Scrapbooks and Clipping, General Scrapbooks 1892–1895, Stored in: oversize box 126, folder 1110.

<sup>717</sup> Gunja Sengupta, *From Slavery to Poverty, The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840–1918* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid.

struggling African Americans in a rural setting, *AECM* refuted this by utilizing New York City as the centerpiece of the novel, which by this way led to new imaginations in literature of black identities. Slave narratives often told stories that dwelled on graphic scenes of inhumane cruelty. Masculinity and violence played important roles within slave narratives; the male slave narrator often invoked a sense of lost origins, usually depicted in terms of the destruction of his family through separation and death. *AECM*, by contrast, told a different story. C. Riley Snorton has suggested reading the protagonist's moves through geographical sites and spaces as a transgender narrative, allowing for a more thorough understanding of the text.<sup>719</sup> Snorton read the protagonist's emphasis on female attributes in the mirror scene,<sup>720</sup> his measuring himself against other women, and the constant cross-gender references within the text itself as transgender yearnings, which Snorton understood as a yearning to articulate a cross-gender desire.<sup>721</sup> In so doing, Snorton depicted a coherent expression of personalized responses to systems of signification and symbolic geography within *AECM*.<sup>722</sup> But, the signification and symbolic geography Snorton posits are also intertwined with the symbols of freedom and democracy embedded in the Statue of Liberty, which, again, is embodied in the body of a woman. The mirror scene was thus mirrored within the text itself by the later depiction of the protagonist's arrival in New York City, to which I will come to in a second.

Reading *AECM* with Snorton adds a transgender viewpoint to the research, and in doing so complicates Afromodernism.<sup>723</sup> This literary criticism's terminology moreover adds to the unmarked territory of modernity, an Afro-modernity. As a result, this points to the various differences in categorizing modernity, and hints to the reasoning of a fractured modernity. From a historian's viewpoint, we can thus understand *AECM* as a fictionalized autobiography, conceived by a new self-writing practice that engages with the transformation of racialized and gendered violence. No doubt what happens in *AECM*, along with its conception, is of interest for the history of black identities, as well. This inquiry can therefore gain a lot when we try to understand the fictional forces of a city symbolized for example within the Statue of

<sup>719</sup> C. Riley Snorton, "Passing for White, Passing for Man, Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as Transgender Narrative," in *Transgender Migrations, The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*, ed. Trystan T. Cotten (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>720</sup> The protagonist, after the scene of recognition, the exposure in front of the class by the teacher separating him from the others, questioning his racial identity, confronts his own image in a mirror. There he notices the "softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples" and his "long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them." Johnson, *Autobiography*, 12.

<sup>721</sup> Others have read this scene as the protagonist questioning his sexuality. For example, Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>722</sup> Snorton, "Passing for White," 113.

<sup>723</sup> The literary criticism terms 'Afro-modern' and 'Afromodernism' refer to a tradition of political thought that emerged in the eighteenth century, with a rich body of argument and insight propelled by various intellectual Africans, including freed slaves like Olaudah Equiano, as well as later African Americans like W.E.B. Du Bois.

Liberty. We get the depicted confinements and borders of the city, on the one hand, and these symbols' depictions in novels, on the other hand. Both, the *real* symbols of the city, as much as their depiction in a fictionalized autobiography like *AECM*, moreover can help to understand how people could make sense of their identities, as well. Furthermore, *AECM* was also unique in terms of what was left out. Omitting the violence of the slave narrative as a key narrative element was one of the central, unique features within *AECM*. Slave narratives were mostly written in order to elicit sympathy from a Northern audience. Johnson in contrast reshaped African American literature by focusing more on the protagonist's passing through multiple cities, while still pointing to the multiple expressions of confinement within African American history.<sup>724</sup> Questions of the sites of identifications are simultaneously raised as well. The historical confinement of African Americans – confinement to be bound to the plantation, to the ship, to owners – was indicated in *AECM* with examples like the protagonist's depiction of New York in Chapter VIII:

My New York was limited to ten blocks; the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross streets one block to the west. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land. I look back upon the life I then led with a shudder when I think what would have been had I not escaped it.<sup>725</sup>

Whereas slave narratives almost always featured scenes of intense physical brutality, *AECM*, by contrast, showed the subliminal, nonetheless violent and brutal processes of identity constructions for African Americans in the United States that were bound to racialized hierarchies, expressed in newly established urban planning practices like zoning, used to enforce racial segregation.<sup>726</sup> This found its artistic expression in *AECM* depicting confined spatial areas, as indicated in the quote above. In these narrative techniques, the transformation of historical confinements for African Americans from the plantation to urban inner-city confinements was, in other words, embedded.

Another difference from slave narratives was Johnson's rearrangement of the slave narratives' recurring notions of the importance of literacy and self-made manhood. Narrators like Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northrup, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibb all spoke of writing oneself into freedom. In *AECM*, at least in its first edition published in 1912, readership did not know who the author was. There was no identifiable narrator and as we have seen in the chapter before, readers and reviewers were left wondering if the author had written an authentic account, a so-called human document. As the readership was left in the

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<sup>724</sup> Robert B. Stepto, "Lost in a Quest: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in Goldsby, NCE, 347.

<sup>725</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography* in Goldsby, NCE, 60.

<sup>726</sup> Christopher Silver, "The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities," in: *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, eds. Thomas Manning and Marsha Ritzdorf (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).



state of not knowing the author's identity, it produced many questions, questions about authenticity, for one. Conceiving the autobiography was also a process of writing oneself into freedom for Johnson to a certain degree, despite war-like scenarios at his consular post in Nicaragua. But, more than writing oneself into freedom, *AECM* was more concerned with the (im-)possibilities of identity acquisition for African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century in the first place.

The unnamed author's movements through the world, questioned by contemporary readership as either real or fictive, thus brought along new possibilities of black identity. Jim Crow laws, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that cemented federal, state-sponsored segregation, laws against so-called 'miscegenation': all of these laws shaped the meaning and definition of freedom in the United States. These laws further authorized and implemented social hierarchies between whites and blacks via the authorial written word of the law. Writing oneself into being relied heavily, within the slave narrative tradition, on a white readership and on white economic networks.<sup>727</sup> In a sense, Johnson also wrote himself into being. He was, first and foremost, a writer — a writer that was able to write in different genres and for diverse readerships. Johnson's writing was shaped through his experiences as a songwriter, a short essay writer, and a political journalist, as well as his university training in creative writing. These experiences helped him to conceive texts, that incited another possibility besides writing oneself into freedom or being: The reviews indicated that the readership, due to the constant questioning about the truthiness of the account, were also comparing their lives and experiences with the autobiography, thus as a consequence reading one's self into being.

The symbolic geography applied in *AECM* was also deeply entangled with identity constructions, as embodied for example by the Statue of Liberty in New York City. The protagonist's arrival in New York City, with his flight from wife, family and work contrasted the white, heteronormative family and work ideal. Johnson skillfully sutured into New York's most powerful symbol of freedom and citizenship, the Statue of Liberty, the very inconsistencies of the gendered and racialized embodiment of nationhood:

New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great white witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face, and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments, - constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims

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<sup>727</sup> For a strong reading of the body politic applied with Judith Butler's performativity concept for the category of race and the one-drop-rule implemented into law shaped by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896; see Felix Krämer and Nina Mackert, "Plessy Revisited, Skizzen dekonstruktivistischer Körpergeschichte(n) von den Vereinigten Staaten der Segregation," in *Verqueerte Verhältnisse, Intersektionale, Ökonomiekritische und strategische Interventionen*, ed. AG Queer Studies (Hamburg: Männerschwarm Verlag, 2009), 66–81.

of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of galley slaves; a few she favors and fondles; riding them high on the bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall.<sup>728</sup>

Johnson transformed New York's mythology of *the* dynamic metropolis of the American continent of the turn of the century by opposing the Statue of Liberty's symbolic representation of freedom and democracy, and in contrast invoking what Ralph Ellison once depicted as the reality of African Americans being "not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives."<sup>729</sup> Johnson in this sense reworked Du Bois's notion of African Americans' 'double consciousness' – seeing oneself as African American through the eyes of others – the white hegemonical majority – and attached it to the Statue of Liberty. Goldsby depicted this narrative part as a bucolic vision of New York City, with a lethal siren out of Homer's *Odyssey* and as a symbolic entrée to the city, "making geographic space a projection of the narrator's state of mind."<sup>730</sup> Another approach to an explanation would be that New York City was depicted through the eyes of the Statue of Liberty. Using the Statue of Liberty as a common denominator for describing the hardships of surviving and making a living in New York City was something to which a lot of people, both black and white, could relate. This technique was similar to what we have seen earlier in Johnson's career, when he tried to break away from 'Negro' stereotypes and write about emotions to which every human could align, as a musical composer. But, by using the Statue of Liberty, Johnson also reworked what Du Bois dubbed the peculiar sensation, the double consciousness idea, into literature. Letting his readership imagine that the Ex-Colored Man saw through the equalizing eyes of the Statue of Liberty and was not only addressing an equalizing subjugation in an urban environment, but also shifting double consciousness away from the white/black color line to a non-human representation.<sup>731</sup>

In the make-up of the aforementioned history of confinement and movement of African Americans, every text written – not only by African Americans, but by Americans in general – even if it is not using specific places or metaphors of spaces and places in its narrative, is still to a certain extent today influenced by the historicity of the slave trade.<sup>732</sup> The cities that

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<sup>728</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography*, in Goldsby, NCE, 48.

<sup>729</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 297.

<sup>730</sup> Goldsby in Johnson, *Autobiography*, XXVIII.

<sup>731</sup> The Statue of Liberty was referred to as the great white witch with a white face (see FN 171); nonetheless, white readers saw themselves not through a black gaze, but through the Statue of Liberty. Johnson may have used this technique of an equalizing subjugated gaze to confront the color line, and pose other questions than constructed racialized divisions between people, such as the lack of security and safety in industrialized labor relations, as indicated in the quote.

<sup>732</sup> See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," in *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2015). Coates describes how the disproportionate incarceration of black Americans in the United States

the protagonist bypasses in *AECM*, and New York City in particular, are important actors in their own right. In *AECM*, the reader encounters what Goldsby has termed a nomadic journey through multiple urban settings like Atlanta, New York, Berlin, London, and Paris. She reads these passages as a modernizing-the-city trope in African American fiction by making migration and urbanization central to a novel's plot for the first time.<sup>733</sup> Prior to Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902, the city as an important backdrop in African American fiction was not yet established – “it existed primarily as an undifferentiated space indistinguishable from the country; the city was just another space to play out the same textual themes that constituted the bulk of African American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s: working for racial uplift, protesting the racist practices of white Americans, and developing a sense of racial pride.”<sup>734</sup> As for example in Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, in which the spaces the characters traverse are not discernibly different, whether they are located in the North, the South, or in the city.<sup>735</sup>

Paul Gilroy, however, in discussing the theoretical relationship and their historical underpinnings, between and of both, Du Bois and Johnson in *The Black Atlantic*, points out that Du Bois – as well as Frederick Douglass – traveled to Europe, as much as Johnson's protagonist in *AECM*.<sup>736</sup> In this passage, Gilroy writes that the “consciousness of ‘race,’ self, and sociality were profoundly changed by the experience of being outside America” for all three of them: Du Bois, Douglass, and, ultimately, the Ex-Colored Man as well.<sup>737</sup> In *AECM*, these nomadic journeys are “complemented by patterns of travel inside America”<sup>738</sup> – especially by the protagonist's journey between the South and New York City. Given the aforementioned history, having been shaped extensively and existentially by the norms of movement, relocation, displacement, and restlessness for African Americans, the Ex-Colored Man's ability to freely roam through inner- and outer-American landscapes and cities must be read as a literary strategy implemented by Johnson. By applying this nomadic theme in *AECM*, he was able to undermine the classical autobiography's mode of black narration.

*AECM*, when released was, although doubted as being a real autobiography, mostly perceived and understood as a real autobiography – which had been Johnson's plan all along.

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was historically tied to pro-slavery intellectuals in the 1860s, mid-nineteenth century vagrancy laws, and the depiction of black people as naturally intemperate stereotypes in medical journals.

<sup>733</sup> Goldsby in Johnson, *Autobiography*, XXVIII.

<sup>734</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, “The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*,” in *African American Review* 38 (2004): 215.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.

<sup>736</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 132.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid., 133.

The genre of autobiography was a medium for self-understanding, and perceived as such as a 'human document.' The protagonist's conflicting self-fashioning was therefore aligned to a reflection of the construction of identities and history – something distinctively new for the prospective readers. One of the pivotal scenes in *AECM* is the protagonist's appellation as a black student by his principal, the teacher, the white, and the black kids in the first chapter.<sup>739</sup> Johnson's depiction of racialized narratives comes to a turning point right at the start of the novel. Addressing the affects that the racialized appellation propelled for the protagonist depicts the embedded narrative power and shows the reality of the color line that at any given time and in everyday encounters could arise. "I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing"<sup>740</sup> was the protagonist's answer to this racialized appellation. Here, within this scene, Johnson makes an African American identity intelligible by addressing the fictitious character of the reality of the 'color line'.

### 3.3. Fictionalized Passing and racialized knowledges of the real

The literary presentation of the act of passing within *AECM* was intertwined with traversing several geographical and historical spaces as an African American man. This subchapter applies Samira Kawash's approach to the color line. In *Dislocating the Color Line*,<sup>741</sup> Kawash uncovers the uncertainty, the incoherency, and the discontinuity of the contemporary common sense of the color line; in other words, she analyzes the historical appearances and usages of the color line in African American literature, covering a timeframe of roughly a century from the 1840s to the 1940s, or, in literary terms, from Frederick Douglass to Zora Neale Hurston. The color line was exemplified by Johnson's invention of the protagonist's passing in *AECM*. It was a pivotal theme. Johnson's protagonist was a light-skinned man. He could thus pass-as-white – and for this reason the nameless Ex-Colored-Man in *AECM* lingered between an unmarked category of white and the racialized category of black. The anonymous publication of the *AECM* propelled a discussion about the authenticity of the account given, as we have seen in Chapter 2. As a result, authenticity was not only bound to the authority of the author to speak truthfully, but, also, put into focus the fictionality of racialized categories.

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<sup>739</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography* in Goldsby, NCE, 11: The principal said, "I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment." I [the protagonist] rose with the others. The teacher looked at me, and calling my name said, "You sit down for the present, and rise with the other." I did not understand her, and questioned, "Ma'm?" She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, "You sit down now, and rise with the other." I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the school was dismissed I went off in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying, "Oh, you're a nigger too."

<sup>740</sup> Ibid.

<sup>741</sup> Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line, Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Johnson wrote a fictionalized autobiography, but it was meant to pass as a real one. It was a strategic and deliberate act by Johnson to not publish *AECM* under his name. Only by anonymously publishing *AECM* was Johnson able to tell the story of the everyday struggle that identity appropriation and categorizations in the United States for African Americans meant. This was at the heart of Johnson's self-writing practice; highlighting the invisibility of the social and cultural construction of racialized categories, its discursive and non-discursive power structure, and, first and foremost the all-encompassing scientific and everyday racism. The genre of the autobiography authorized the account through its established narrative and genre conventions. If Johnson had published under his real name, discussions about the authenticity of the autobiography would always have been tied to his life. In this sense, Johnson could draw on what was always predicated on 'hybrid transformations' of identity appropriation, as Muñoz has called it.<sup>742</sup> By 'hybrid transformations,' Muñoz refers to Néstor García Canlini's notion of cultural existence of individuals through "hybrid transformations generated by the horizontal coexistence of a number of symbolic systems."<sup>743</sup> One of these symbolic systems that secured and authorized a racialized hierarchy was scientific racism.<sup>744</sup> The light-skinned protagonist in *AECM* thus assessed an identity always in relation to the place in which he appeared, and to the relationship to other people with whom he engaged – without ever fully acknowledging the categories of white or black. Johnson made this shifting and fluid assessment of what we today call identity visible through the passing of the protagonist, thereby referring to what I call the reality of racialized knowledge at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The reader is introduced in the first chapters to childhood memories of the first-person narrator: his birthplace Georgia, and a long journey to Connecticut with his mother, where he eventually grew up. In school, he met a smart schoolmate who was being bullied and subsequently became a friend. The protagonist was looked down upon, because he is black without realizing it, or to be more precise, was without a conception of this category. The narrator recounted the taunting of the school kids, which both he and his friend had to endure on their way home from school.<sup>745</sup> The narrator told his mother that one of the black children fought back by striking a boy with a slate. The protagonist, in describing the scene, used the word 'nigger' for the child who fought back. His mother lambasted him, pressing him to never use that word again, and insisting that he never should bother the 'colored' children at

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<sup>742</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid.

<sup>744</sup> See Melissa N. Stein, *Measuring Manhood, Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>745</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography* in Goldsby NCE, 11. The harassment was made visible in the phrase "Nigger, nigger, never die, Black face and shiny eye."

school.<sup>746</sup> The narrator was hurt because of the harsh words of his mother – not because he had done wrong, but because he was hurt by “the first sharp word she had ever given me.”<sup>747</sup> The protagonist had used the racialized slurs of the white kids in school without realizing that he might also be addressed as black, as he learns only shortly thereafter.

The protagonist’s turning point in realizing the power of racialized categorizations follows closely after this incident. At the end of the second term, the principal asked the children for “all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.”<sup>748</sup> The narrator rose – an action which is instantly answered through the teacher by calling out his name: “You sit down for the present, and rise with others.”<sup>749</sup> The narrator, puzzled and failing to understand, questioned the teacher by asking “Ma’am?”<sup>750</sup> – which was answered by a repetition of her request, only with a softer tone. The narrator sat down, dazed. He no longer saw or heard anything. After the pupils are dismissed, the narrator was still in “a kind of stupor”<sup>751</sup> and left with white boys jeering at him.<sup>752</sup> The pupils taunted him through the power of the racialized category, established by the authority of the teacher: “Oh, you’re a nigger too.”<sup>753</sup> The black children underscored the teacher’s authority by acknowledging: “We knew he was colored.”<sup>754</sup> In this scene, we can see a depiction of what happened on an everyday basis at the turn-of-the-century in the United States, the invocation of a racialized hierarchy, through singling out individuals. It illustrates a power not simply deployed as a force by others over others, but more as a power that was produced through the epistemological power to name and evaluate. This epistemological power is at work here, as depicted by Johnson. As a result, this narrative element questioned the assumed naturalness of racial categories. Moreover, by telling this story through and within a genre of self-writing – autobiography – the discursively embedded power of racializing groups and individuals was first made visible by Johnson, and, secondly, opposed. The narrator’s relation to the world was rendered, up to this point, through him interacting with his friends – not through racialized categories of which he was not aware. After the enforced categorization of the narrator, the protagonist lingers between worlds of categories, trying to make sense of his identity, reappropriating the power to his own needs by shifting between black and white.

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<sup>746</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography*, in Goldsby NCE, 11.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid.

<sup>753</sup> Ibid.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid.

Passing means to disguise oneself, or to simulate someone – to impersonate another gender, race or class. It is obvious that passing is, therefore, not easy for historians to analyze, and is considerably less easy for historians to quantify, because the whole point was to become ‘invisible’ as a black or ‘colored’ man in order to assume the possibilities of a white man. However, analyzing through quantifying in this case means to use the very same tools that were necessary to establish categories of difference, as race, in the first place; measuring manhood along racialized lines, anthropocentric pigment studies, and phrenology, were popular in science in the nineteenth century. Despite scientific and everyday racism, the ensuing amassment of data that established categories, and the fact that there has been a “huge cultural anxiety surrounding the possible crossing the color line, virtually nothing beyond the anecdotal is known about the magnitude or distribution of actual race passing in the United States at any time,”<sup>755</sup> Samira Kawash has pointed out at the end of the 1990s in her attempt to trace the path of the color line in the United States as it appeared in the writings of African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>756</sup> Due to the quantification of data from individual experience changes in reported racial identity, and by using the full population of historical Censuses for 1880 to 1940, tracing what Kawash termed the path of the color line is nowadays quantifiable. Emily Nix and Nancy Qian documented 19% of black males ‘passed’ for white at some point during their lifetime, and around 10% of whom ‘reverse-passed’ to being black.<sup>757</sup> But, although having quantifiable data and a methodology at hand nowadays, it is still necessary to study the literature of race passing, because a “cultural phenomenon that evaded direct study,”<sup>758</sup> is not fully understandable as a cultural phenomenon solely through quantification. The fictional account of passing in *AECM* is, therefore, not just a literary tool, but must also be considered a historical depiction of a practice propelled by structuring, understanding, and conceiving of humans through and within categories. For this reason, Johnson’s self-writing practice is helpful in understanding how subjects with fixed structures of meaning emerged in specific historical contexts. Focusing on self-writing then again reveals furthermore the fluidity of identity categories.

On a theoretical level, this means that discursive systems operating together, such as scientific racism, medical-legal discourse, but also their transmissions into everyday acts and popular culture, formed on the one hand networks of a distinct knowledge that were able to

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<sup>755</sup> Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 126.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid.

<sup>757</sup> Emily Nix, Nancy Qian, *The Fluidity of Race: “Passing” in the United States, 1880–1940* (January 2015). National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 20828.

[http://www.econ.yale.edu/~nq3/NANCYS\\_Yale\\_Website/resources/papers/NixQian\\_20150101.pdf](http://www.econ.yale.edu/~nq3/NANCYS_Yale_Website/resources/papers/NixQian_20150101.pdf)

<sup>758</sup> Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 127.

interpellate individuals into social locations enforced through categorizations.<sup>759</sup> On the other hand, these epistemologies are always characterized by breaches through which individuals like writers can intervene, as we have seen via the example of the Statue of Liberty, and its rearrangement of what it symbolizes apart from freedom and democracy in Johnson's novel. Establishing this fictional narrative in an autobiography, therefore, made it possible to depict how racial knowledge was only "seemingly guaranteed by the color line."<sup>760</sup> Moreover, the narrative within *AECM* as depicted within this pivotal scene, but also through the mere publication of this book, visualized the breaches within the historically hardened discursive system of categorizing and the fact that categories always tend to become tenuous when challenged. This ordering and categorizing was a violent act. Thus, racialized identities were constantly in paradoxical situations with respect to their self-identification. One strategy to get around this violent categorization was, then, to constantly disidentify with given categories, whether fictional or real.

Johnson certainly was aware of the everyday failed interpellations of African Americans, for which reasons he strategically reworked the tradition of the slave narrative to complicate the depictions and illustrations that were bound to racialized categories. Johnson implemented this strategy, as we have seen, in his earliest works. If Du Bois was able to reflect a sense of dualism in *Souls* by depicting the 'twoness' of African Americans, Johnson not only offered a literary translation of this theoretical approach, but, moreover, showed how categories were always bound to fail to depict the life not only of minorities, but of humans altogether. The trope of passing in American history dates back to at least the late eighteenth century, when countless African Americans passed as white.<sup>761</sup> As Allyson Hobbs explains in *A Chosen Exile – A History of Racial Passing*, African Americans passed as white and left behind families, friends, and communities. She therefore focuses on the many losses that passing as white meant for African Americans in general, and what was lost by leaving a black racial identity in particular. In *AECM* as exemplified with the appellation of the narrator as black, or, to be more precise, a 'nigger,' the reality of leaving and losing communities by the act of passing is mirrored in the novel's climax. The narrator witnessed the brutal lynching of a black man, which spurred him to "neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white

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<sup>759</sup> Louis Althusser, *Ideologie und ideologische Staatsapparate: Aufsätze zur marxistischen Theorie* (Hamburg: VSA, 2009) 108–153.

<sup>760</sup> Black subjectivity was tenuous at best, as Kawash wrote, during slavery, because slaves were not distinct from property. Even with the end of slavery that freedom maintained a kind of contingency not shared with the freedom applied to whites in general. Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 44.

<sup>761</sup> Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile, A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2014).



race, but [to] change my name, raise a moustache, and let world take me for what it would.”<sup>762</sup> He thus depicted himself as living in a self-defined limbo as an ‘ex-colored’ man. In the end, the protagonist became a businessman and by his wealth and supposed whiteness he confessed “after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.”<sup>763</sup>

Hobbs argues that research prior to her own traditionally focused much more on what was gained by passing as white. As Hobbs further elaborates, the historian’s task, then, is not only a challenging one, but has to make use of “unconventional sources that vary at different historical moments, both in the evidence presented and in the consequences of the act.”<sup>764</sup> One of these unconventional sources still is *AECM*, and its depiction of the crisis, the challenges, and the ambiguity of racial passing. Within *AECM*, as Hobbs argues are the “textured accounts of family histories [that] cast the personal losses of passing in the starkest relief whereas other types of sources bring a blurred history into sharp focus.”<sup>765</sup> Hobbs therefore focuses on passing as a collective practice, more than portraying it as an individualistic enterprise. Rather than focusing on the very act of passing as done by Hobbs in reference to losses, I focus on the linkage between the socio-political macrostructure of racial knowledges and Johnson’s self-writing practice that was able to depict the intricacies of identity appropriation for African Americans.

As already mentioned in the main introduction, the understanding of power followed here in this study does not mean the force wielded over others. The production of racial knowledge at the beginning of the twentieth century did not derive from one single institution or even one sole individual that can be addressed as the main negotiator of power. Nor can the production of racial knowledge be made out solely in America’s racial vocabulary – as Roediger exemplified – “it [racial knowledge] had no agency of its own but, rather, reflected material conditions and power relations.”<sup>766</sup> Nonetheless, these material conditions and power relations were embedded in the epistemological power to name and evaluate, as seen in the example with the schoolboy’s appellation as black. Thus, to analyze self-writing with regard to the processes of identity appropriation as depicted in *AECM*, one has to be aware of the fact

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<sup>762</sup> Johnson, *Autobiography*, in Goldsby NCE, 99.

<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>764</sup> Hobbs, *Chosen Exile*, 6.

<sup>765</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>766</sup> David R. Roediger, *Colored White, Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 142.

that it “illustrates the murky terrain of race passing”<sup>767</sup> and therefore is able to get a hold on a “cultural phenomenon that evade[s] direct study.”<sup>768</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Johnson wanted to extrapolate notions of identity that differed from stereotypical renderings of African Americans emphasized over and over again in popular culture and everyday life. The space of the novel was, therefore, a place where fictionalized identities could circumvent societal realities like fixation and destruction of the body, racialization, and oppression that African Americans had to confront. It was not solely the writer’s ability to produce such a space, but, further, the interaction between reader and text, that made resistance successful or unsuccessful. Analyzing Johnson’s self-writing practice as implemented in the genre of the autobiography, we can gain a deeper understanding of the historicity of African Americans’ identities and subjectivities at the pre-last turn-of-the-century. As seen in Part 1, Werther, too, wrote an autobiography – one with a protagonist who anticipated other subject positions’ emergence – one which allowed him to exist. *The Autobiography of Androgyne* in this very sense is comparable to *AECM*, because it tackled issues that had not yet been published in a book. It is also comparable in the sense that it was similar to Johnson’s fictionalized autobiography because it also relied on the usage and combination of different textual genres to unfold a subject position that had not yet been available: being an androgyne. But, whereas Werther’s autobiographical approach was heavily shaped by confessional and sexological writings of his time, Johnson’s self-writing practice was influenced by his career as a songwriter and political essayist.

Johnson self-writing practice thus extrapolated the reality of African American identities in literary terms. Self-writing as seen here was, therefore, deeply concerned with the reality of becoming a subject in a country that for centuries had perceived African Americans not as humans, but as objects. Furthermore, Johnson’s self-writing practice was deeply aligned and concerned with what can be understood as the fractured existence of African Americans in the United States, which as a consequence certainly shaped identity appropriations. The specific cultural form that every individual had to acquire to become a fully authorized and exemplary citizen in the United States was a process of subjectivation.<sup>769</sup> The identity of the protagonist, the unnamed Ex-Colored Man, was a fictional character, but the depicted movements through various spaces were, in fact, relatable to the reality of

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<sup>767</sup> Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*, 127.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid.

<sup>769</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, *Subjekt* (Bielefeld: Transcript 2008), 82.

African Americans. In the end, the protagonist rejected his blackness. As a consequence Johnson hinted to the tropes of racial passing and the reality of lynchings, which were intertwined with an understanding of a white bourgeoisie identity that functioned as a transcendent, self-contained, mobile, invisibly constructed, and powerful idea in the United States. Doubtless Johnson was aware of this, as it had been an everyday reality to African Americans and his self-writing was thus able to show what it meant to be without a legible, stable, and coherent racial identity.

As Kathleen Pfeiffer has argued, “throughout his narrative, the Ex-Colored Man does not so much reject his blackness as he rejects the ontology of racial categories.”<sup>770</sup> Johnson’s illustration of this rejection of racial categories was made possible by writing techniques that he had acquired as a songwriter and political essayist for the *Daily American* long before he turned to the study of literature at Columbia University. Johnson shaped *AECM* in a unique and unprecedented way, by questioning racial categories, thereby questioning a positivistic understanding of the world whose production of knowledge was disseminated through means of measuring, calculating, and categorizing.<sup>771</sup> *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a key text, not only for the depiction of an American literary modern period, but also for understanding the epistemologies of race, class, and gender.

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<sup>770</sup> Kathleen Pfeiffer, “Individualism, Success, and American Identity in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” in *African American Review*, 30, 3 (1996): 404.

<sup>771</sup> The fetishizing of numbers and of surplus value has reconstructed white elite network systems in the United States throughout its history. For an economic approach that follows this line of thought, see: Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations, The Economic of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912–2002* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

## Part IV

### Self-writing in diaries

#### 1. Introduction

USS *Miantonomoh* (monitor/warship in service 1864–1872)  
USS *Miantonomoh* (BM-5) (monitor/warship in service 1876–1907)  
USS *Miantonomah* (CMc-5) (cargo ship in service 1941–1944)  
USS *Miantonomah* (ACM-13) (minelayer ship in service 1950–1955)<sup>772</sup>

The United States Navy and other branches of the United States Armed Forces have a long tradition of naming their military equipment after Native American nations, tribes, and renowned personalities. For instance, several military helicopters bear the names Apache, Comanche, Chinook, Lakota, Cheyenne, and Kiowa. The operation that killed Osama bin Laden was named after the prominent leader of the Chiricahua Apache tribe in the conflict between the Apache Alliance and the United States from 1849–1924. There are countless other examples of this practice. It is a practice that historically follows in the wake of imperial subjugation, forceful invasions and territorial appropriation of Native American lands, and can be understood with the multidimensional phenomenon of cultural appropriation, which can be broadly defined as “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.”<sup>773</sup> Even today many companies, sports teams, and products in the United States have Native American names. Simon Waxman, editor of the *Boston Review*, posits that complaints of this practice are often shrugged off and answered in a similar fashion as the president of the Washington Redskins: The Washington Redskins have “always been respectful of and shown reverence toward the proud legacy and traditions of Native Americans.”<sup>774</sup>

It is not farfetched to assume that Richard Ward Greene Welling – a lawyer, social reformer, naval commander, and author – might have answered similarly. Based in New York City for most of his life, he showed a keen historic interest in Native American nations and tribes of New England. As I argue in this chapter, Welling’s interest in Native American

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<sup>772</sup> Navy Department, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval History Division, *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* Vol. IV (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 347/8.

<sup>773</sup> Bruce Ziff, Pratima V. Rao, “Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis,” in *Borrowed Power, Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>774</sup> Simon Waxman, “The U.S. Military’s Ongoing Slur of Native Americans,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 2014 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/simon-waxman-tomahawk-missiles-apache-helicopters-just-as-offensive-as-redskins/2014/06/26/16c18738-fc9a-11e3-932c-0a55b81f48ce\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5aef1dc93808](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/simon-waxman-tomahawk-missiles-apache-helicopters-just-as-offensive-as-redskins/2014/06/26/16c18738-fc9a-11e3-932c-0a55b81f48ce_story.html?utm_term=.5aef1dc93808)

cultures and identities was based in fictions and fantasies of Native American people. In his writing and performances, Welling used his fantasy about Sachem Miantonomoh, a leader of the Narragansett tribe of the early seventeenth century, to self-fashion as a white man in New York City elite culture in the late nineteenth century.<sup>775</sup> In early 1897 Welling was asked to participate in the Bradley-Martin Ball in New York City – a dressing ball sometimes depicted as a peak event of the Gilded Age.<sup>776</sup> He accepted the invitation and started contemplating what to wear. On February 11, 1897 Welling chose to ‘dress’ as Miantonomoh. He wrote about this self-making in his diaries. In the aftermath, it became one of the most discussed appearances in the city’s newspapers for more than a month. Through his self-writing practice in his diaries, Welling negotiated, processed, and prepared his brief impersonation.

Welling’s practice of self-writing in combination with his preparation for and the performance itself in ‘dressing up’ as Miantonomoh in the Bradley-Martin Ball, is this chapters’ focus. It highlights how identity appropriation through temporary ethnic drag is intertwined with the omission of what Stuart Hall calls the “quintessential other.”<sup>777</sup> This ‘quintessential other’ in the American cultural imagination is quite often Native American people.<sup>778</sup> Moreover Welling’s interest towards Native Americans – as exemplified in his writings – does speak to the macro-historical setup in which wealthy Euro-American white men constructed their identities in a late nineteenth century urban metropolis like New York City. Welling’s practices of self-writing and self-making thus has something in common with minstrel performers and their blackface acts – a mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation that Homi Bhabha calls its ‘ambivalence’ and Erik Lott analyzes in his book on blackface minstrelsy and the American working class, *Love and Theft*.<sup>779</sup> But, unlike minstrel performers and their practice of blackface, Welling’s ethnic drag stage was not the theatre – his stage was an elite culture ball for “the upper crust of society” – as the *New York Times* named the participants – at the Hotel Waldorf.<sup>780</sup> In Welling’s diaries we find notes on his meetings with renowned anthropologists and prominent friends, annotating his discussions

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<sup>775</sup> Sachem (and Sagamore) are terms used for paramount chiefs of Native American tribes of the northeast. Sachem is the anglicized version of sâchim. Miantonomoh was Sachem in association with Canonicus. Sometimes referred to as Miantonomo, Miantonomah, Miantonomi. For the sake of readability, I use Miantonomoh throughout this study.

<sup>776</sup> Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy, A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Book, 2002).

<sup>777</sup> Stuart Hall, *Ideologie, Identität, Repräsentation. Ausgewählte Schriften 4* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2004).

<sup>778</sup> Most Indian communities prefer to call themselves “the people” – a simple term that does not refer to a specific race or political ideology. Cf. R. David Edmunds and Frederick E. Hoxie, Neal Salisbury, *The People, A History of Native America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007) IX.

<sup>779</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

<sup>780</sup> “Boston Guests at the Ball,” *New York Times*, 09 Feb 1897: 3.

about “the algonquian New England indian.”<sup>781</sup> His self-making by writing and performing is thus of interest because it visualizes an understudied part of ethnic drag: The significance of urban elite cultural networks that propelled and produced the omission and appropriation of the history of Native Americans in the United States, and which was an integral part of a fractured modernity in the previous turn-of-the-century. Analyzing Welling’s brief diary entries about the ‘algonquian New England indian’ thus help, as a consequence, to uncover how he forged and negotiated a white male identity within New York City societal circles by diary writing.

Welling’s impersonation of Miantonomoh – as many other acts of temporary or long-time assumptions of other identities like passing or cross-dressing – was a disidentification practice. But it was by no means a survival strategy in the sense Muñoz understood disidentification – and as shown in the three preceding chapters. Welling’s self-writing brings something else to the foreground. The United States military had conquered Native American nations and tribes almost completely by 1890. This was followed by paternalism towards Native American histories and identities, which reached a peak in the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>782</sup> Welling’s impersonation – and thus his identity construction – was part of this paternalism. In his self-conception, this paternalism was on the one hand benevolent and charitable, but on the other hand it was also a basic element of a practice intended to extinguish Native Americans, their agency, traditions, and practices.<sup>783</sup> As a result, what one can see with Welling’s self-making practice – his self-writing and performing – is how whiteness and masculinity operated on the appropriation of the history of Native Americans through alleged benevolence.

Welling’s ethnic drag is indeed marked by an ambivalence between benevolence and violence towards Native Americans, and moreover this ambivalence was utilized to position himself in socialite circles in New York City. Elite culture was part and parcel of reshaping white male identity through impersonation to the disadvantage and ongoing destruction of Native American histories, identities, and cultures. I understand elite culture as a nexus of networks and actors that shared wealth and access to material resources, and thereby were able to drive forward Euro-American systems of knowledge about Native Americans. Welling is, as a consequence, a figuration for a white man that highlights a lethal combination of knowledge shaped through scientific racism in eugenics, as well as in burgeoning

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<sup>781</sup> Richard Ward Greene Welling Papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Box 31.

<sup>782</sup> Jürgen Martschukat, *Die Ordnung des Sozialen, Väter und Familien in der amerikanischen Geschichte seit 1770* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013), 213.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

anthropology – intertwined with elite culture traditions like festive dressing balls. Kathrin Sieg understood ethnic drag as a means of negotiating racial difference.<sup>784</sup> Sieg utilized this term to analyze the lived, disavowed, and contested ‘Germanness’ in its complex, racial, national, and sexual dimensions after the Second World War. She furthermore analyzes ethnic drag as a performance in her analysis. In contrast, this chapter focuses on ethnic drag as a practice in combination with Welling’s self-writing practice. With the help of this approach, the self-making practice of a white male American identity becomes discernable. Welling’s self-making is thus similar to what Sieg calls “a figure of substitution”<sup>785</sup> for “traumatic holes in the social fabric.”<sup>786</sup> With bringing to attention here Welling’s practice of self-writing and aligning practices of self-inspection, this chapter understands his self-making as a figuration of a white upper-class-‘benevolent’-masculinity that is produced through a cross-racial yearning for ‘Nativity.’

This chapter’s main interest lies in Welling’s brief and continuing everyday notations, written in a small red book titled “A Daily Reminder”<sup>787</sup> about his preparations leading to the costume ball. Doing that – annotating briefly and daily what happened – was nothing special. Neither for a young Harvard graduate, nor for a social reformer, or a political advisor; it was part of what young and old white societal men did to make sense of themselves at the end of the nineteenth century. But, in his writings about his impersonation of Miantonomoh we see that this everyday practice of diary writing was something more than a daily reminder; it shaped his self-identification and depicted the process of acquiring a viable and livable white self at the expense of the ‘quintessential other’ in Hall’s understanding. As much as Welling – the social reformer – strived to better education in the United States, he was also interested in improving himself. His diary writing practice helped him to fulfill his self-improvement, and with this self-making practice one can see how this was intertwined with stereotypes about Native Americans in the United States. In the next section, I will briefly introduce Native American and Narragansett people’s history, as it is impossible to understand Welling’s ethnic drag without referring to the realities of Native Americans and Narragansett people at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States in the first place. The subsequent sections will then introduce Welling’s self-identification as an author followed by his self-making from different angles. First, I will present the Bradley-Martin Ball and Welling’s preparations for it. Second, I will in more detail show how cultural appropriation was

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<sup>784</sup> Kathrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.

<sup>787</sup> “A Daily Reminder,” Livingston Middleditch Co., 6557 Duane Street, NY., in New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

connected to Welling's imagined ancestry and the history of the Narragansett people. The third subchapter will focus on the importance of anthropological knowledge and the notion of authenticity for the event. Fourth, I will conclude with how his impersonation was connected to one of the most prominent and sticky stereotypes in the United States of a Native American person, Pocahontas. The last chapter thus shows how Welling paired at the ball with Annie Morgan – who 'dressed' as Pocahontas, a daughter of the leader from the Powhatan tribe in the early seventeenth century.

## 2. Native American history, identities and cultural appropriation

To understand the obliteration of Native American histories, identities, and cultures one needs to address the violent history that shaped the United States. Estimates for the numbers of Pre-Columbian North American people vary significantly from about 18 million to less than 2 million people.<sup>788</sup> In numerous wars, characterized by forced removals from their homelands, contact with European diseases spread throughout the Americas, like smallpox epidemics, and the ever-present idea conceived by former President George Washington and Henry Know of 'civilizing' Native Americans by assimilation. Assimilation was intertwined with the idea of a manifest destiny<sup>789</sup> and its concurrent expansion into the West, a series of (broken) treaties and land cessions, the almost complete extinction of buffalos as the basic food resource and the establishment of reservations. As a consequence, at the end of the nineteenth century many Native American nations and tribes were either extinct or significantly diminished. The Department of the Interior's *Report on Indians Taxed and Indians not Taxed* of the *Eleventh Census* counted 248.253 Native Americans in total left in 1890.<sup>790</sup>

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<sup>788</sup> Dean R. Snow, "Microchronology and Demographic Evidence Relating to the Size of Pre-Columbian North American Indian Populations," in *Science* 268, 5217 (1995). In 1923, James Mooney proposed a total count of 1.1152.950 Indians in all tribal areas north of Mexico at the end of the fifteenth century. Russell Thornton in *American Indian Holocaust and Survival* estimated a figure over 5 million, while other scholars like Lenore Stiffarm and Phil Lane, Jr. suggested 12 million, and anthropologist Henry Dobyns in 1983 had estimated North American people at the time of the European arrival on the present territory at about 10 million and in North America as a whole at 18 million people. See Guenter Lewy, "Were American Indians the Victims of Genocide?" [last accessed July 21, 2017] <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/7302>

<sup>789</sup> Manifest destiny was the idea of a supposed inevitability of territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific. As a consequence, this idea validated racism and genocidal violence against Native American nations. It became a major force in U.S. foreign policy since the 1890s. It originated from John L. O'Sullivan's usage of the phrase in a magazine for the Democratic Party in 1845. He used the phrase in order to depict the assumed necessity of annexing Texas and the inevitability of American westward expansion. See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny, The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 198), 219.

<sup>790</sup> Department of the Interior Census Office, "Report on Indians Taxed and Indians not Taxed in the United States, Except Alaska," in *Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 5.



Historians like Norbert Finzsch, Tracey Banivanua Mar, and Penelope Edmonds have characterized these events as genocidal wars against Native Americans.<sup>791</sup> This definition of genocide follows the Deleuzian approach used by Finzsch, which pleads for a wide definition of genocide, understood as a “wave-like quotidian practice below the threshold of what is commonly defined as a singular and linear event.”<sup>792</sup> Following this definition of genocide and genocidal wars furthermore is not without consequence for this study. If genocides combine as Finzsch argues “both agency and intentionality with long-lasting processes in the sense that even the Holocaust was only possible because of pre-existing discourses,”<sup>793</sup> these long-lasting processes are connected to various planes of discursive and non-discursive violence, as for example co-opting Native American identities through ethnic drag.<sup>794</sup>

The history of Native Americans and colonial expansion and settlement was not a binary history of oppressed versus oppressor. Native American nations and tribes fought against each other and Native American nations and tribes participated in wars as allies for English and French settlers and armies. But, as Juliana Barr posits, one needs to address and acknowledge “the fundamental essence of Indian sovereignty”<sup>795</sup> and “how Indians understood territory and boundaries, how they extended power over geographic space, and how their practices of claiming, marking, and understanding territory differed not only from Europeans’ but also from each other’s.”<sup>796</sup> Nonetheless there were numerous violent encounters between Euro-American settlers and Native American nations and tribes, and those encounters were deeply intertwined with US American meta-stories of democracy, freedom and liberty.

In Welling’s case the meta-story of democracy was embedded in his self-making as a proponent of youth education – as a school reformer – where ‘democratic living’ was taught. Welling was founder and member of many social reform groups and organizations including

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<sup>791</sup> Tracey Banivanua Mar, Penelope Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space, Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), Joanne Barker, *Native Acts, Law, Recognition and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), Norbert Finzsch (2008) “[...] Extirpate or remove that vermine” : genocide, biological warfare, and settler imperialism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10:2, 215–232: 219.

<sup>792</sup> Finzsch, “Extirpate or Remove that Vermine,” 219.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid.

<sup>794</sup> Katrin Sieg has theorized this type of performance as a form of ethnic drag. As Sieg explains, “as a crossing of racial lines in performance, ethnic drag simultaneously erases and redraws boundaries posturing as ancient and immutable.” Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>795</sup> Juliana Barr, “Borders and Borderlands,” in *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians*, eds. Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>796</sup> Barr, “Borders and Borderlands,” 9.

the City Reform Club and the City Club. The latter organized and hosted 25 Good Government Clubs like the Citizens Union, an institution that for instance helped to elect the 92nd Major of New York City, Seth Low, to office. Welling also founded the National Self Government Committee, “teaching democracy to young people, not as a set of verbal statements about principles, but as a process of emotional attitudes and habits of thinking and doing.”<sup>797</sup> When he learned about the student self-government experiment of William R. George’s George Junior Republic Association in upstate New York in 1895, he became a staunch proponent of this experiment in youth self-organizing.<sup>798</sup> On first sight, it seems that he encouraged democratic values for children and adolescents, while, on the other hand, promoted assimilation politics for Native Americans, African-Americans and others “who have been a little wild in their community or in boarding schools.”<sup>799</sup> This was an integral part of the democratic project in the United States. His impersonation as sachem of the Narragansett people in a costume ball speaks to this – only at first glance – seeming contradiction.

The discursive field in which distinct white male identities were forged as a result is still at work when we look at contemporary discourses of multi-cultural humanism. As Joanne Barker argues, Native American genocide, dispossession, and exploitation of the last five decades (1960s–2000s) were embedded in discursive maneuvers that embodied “an ever-present multicultural humanism that recognizes and celebrates the intrinsic value of Native cultures and identities.”<sup>800</sup> In particular, the people who have “historically benefitted from histories of Native oppression”<sup>801</sup> can now “perceive their positions of power and legal entitlements as somehow inevitable by recognizing and celebrating Native cultures and identities.”<sup>802</sup> But this discursive maneuvering did not just start in the 1960s with the burgeoning theory of multicultural humanism in sociology and political philosophy that

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<sup>797</sup> William McAndrew, Review of Richard Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, in *National Municipal Review*, 32, 5, May 278.

<sup>798</sup> William R. George founded a junior city where citizens between 16 and 21 with a “sound mind and a sound body” would learn through the Republic’s motto, “Nothing Without Labor,” to value property and manage their institution (schools, summer camps, classes, farms) by imitating real cities. In *As the Twig*, Welling’s depiction of the first George Junior Republic reads almost as a homesteader story. The experiment in self-government commenced in upper New York State, at Freeville, on July 10, 1895 was planned for the summer. But as it worked so well, Welling wrote, George found five boys volunteering for the winter months and as they survived the harsh winter with a labor and school routine the “first campers had been loud in their praise of self-government, and news of the summer Junior Republic was widely spread... [receiving] hundreds of boys who wanted to spend the summer...” Richard Ward Greene Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1942), 149–150.

<sup>799</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 150.

<sup>800</sup> Joanne Barker, *Native Acts, Law, Recognition and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>801</sup> Barker, *Native Acts*, 5.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*

various English-speaking countries adopted as an official national policy. The discursive maneuvers started already with the first contact between Native Americans and European settlers and culminated in 1885, when Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show celebrated and romanticized the leader of the Hunkpapa Lakota, Sitting Bull.<sup>803</sup> For this reason, it is furthermore important to analyze other, earlier and not so obvious forms of celebrating Native cultures, such as acts of impersonation in costume balls in elite culture. Although Welling's impersonation of Miantonomoh for a festive elite culture ball was only one example in a long tradition of Euro-American settlers eradicating Native American history by appropriating and exhibiting Native culture, it shows on the one hand the normative and everyday quality in which Native American history was eradicated and on the other how white wealthy men used this celebration for their own self-making.

Focusing on the appropriation of Native American identities, it is important to know that European descendants did not create the United States out of an unsettled wilderness. One needs to be aware that "they [Euro-Americans] grafted their colonies and settlements onto long-existent Indian homelands that constituted the entire continent,"<sup>804</sup> as Juliana Barr posits. When Europeans invaded the East Coast of Northern America, there was no part "that was not claimed and ruled by sovereign Indian regimes."<sup>805</sup> To understand the stereotypes embedded in the impersonation of sachem Miantonomoh of the Narragansett people by Welling it is furthermore important to understand Native worlds. One way to start is to address and acknowledge Indian identity. Only by doing so can we see how the self-making of the social reformer Welling and the identity he thought to acquire has much to do with gendered, racialized, as well as, class-based realities in elite culture networks of New York City. It is impossible to show the often-neglected agency of Native Americans and the Narragansett people in general – ignoring them as individuals and allowing them no subjectivity – as this chapter's focus is Welling's self-making and self-writing.

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<sup>803</sup> Sitting Bull had been a major political figure and was recognized as one of the most important Native American political leaders between 1868 and 1876. He refused to cooperate with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, wherefore his warriors lived isolated on the Plains. He led the confederated Lakota tribes in the victory against the United States Army in 1876, annihilating Lt. Col. Custer's 7th Cavalry. Media coverage was driven by outrage of Custer's death and the government deployed thousands of soldiers into the region pursuing the Lakota and forcing many to surrender. Sitting Bull, refusing to surrender, went into exile, and then refused a pardon and chance to return. After four years of exile and ensuing problems making a living, Sitting Bull surrendered and was subsequently held on a reservation, which he was allowed only to leave to go on a Wild West Show with Buffalo Bill Cody's *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*.

<sup>804</sup> Juliana Barr, "Borders and Borderlands," in *Why You Can't Teach United States History without American Indians*, eds. Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O'Brien et al. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid.

Native Americans created communities, as R. David Edmunds posits, based on member's ties to one another of kinship and interdependence.<sup>806</sup> The key practice in this communal creation was the ideal of reciprocity. This included both human and non-human beings, which gave gifts with the expectation of appropriate reciprocity. By focusing on the practice of reciprocity, inter-Indian and non-Indian, specifically Euro-American, contacts and communications can best be put into perspective. Despite the fact that 'being Indian' has meant different things at different times, and Native American identities have never stopped changing "reciprocal exchanges constituted the glue linking not only near neighbors but diverse Indian peoples separated by long distances."<sup>807</sup> Although Native American "communities created of languages and dialects, hundreds of distinctive tribal traditions, and dozens of ways of making a living from the land around them,"<sup>808</sup> their reciprocal relationships built social roles that were different from non-Indian communities. This furthermore led to a different sense of time, place and understanding of what an event was in the first place. This inter-Indian linkage of reciprocity was, since the first contact with Euro-Americans, confronted by "an epic drama of survival in the face of dispossession and horrific cruelty, and courageous *persistence* in the face of colonization and oppression."<sup>809</sup>

Various cultural appropriations of Native Americans' culture – as we have already seen – are still broadly discussed until today. Welling's ethnic drag is thus relevant to the ongoing struggle for Native Americans in general and the Narragansetts in particular – as it illustrates the construction of a white man's subjectivity in late-nineteenth century and how it was intertwined with the Euro-American project of self-making by utilizing Native American histories and identities. But, moreover it demonstrates the underlying history of the present struggles of Native American lives in the United States. The impersonation of Miantonomoh by Welling was certainly not one of the first cultural appropriations of Native American identities. S. Elizabeth Bird has depicted how white Americans were *Dressing in Feathers* and how myths and fantasies of cultural images of Native Americans have been produced for generations.<sup>810</sup> These myths and fantasies are an integral part of cultural appropriation and as a consequence are not merely taking something away, but also are quite productive in adding, engendering, making, and inventing images and knowledge. Bird's edited book approaches the construction of Native American identities by white Euro-Americans in popular culture. In contrast, the next sections will analyze two strands of elite culture practices; the event of the

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<sup>806</sup> Edmunds, *The People*, 2.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid. X.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid.

<sup>810</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, *Dressing in Feathers, The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

Bradley-Martin Ball<sup>811</sup> and scientific anthropological expertise in order to highlight how the construction of an urban, intellectual, white male identity was constructed in New York City – at the expense of Native American territories and lives. Welling’s self-writing practice thus offers a lens into late nineteenth century understanding of geographical space in relationship to identity construction.

### 3. Self-Writing as a white man

Welling was born in North Kingston, Rhode Island, on August 27, 1858, next to Narragansett Bay, named after the Narragansett people. Sachem Canonicus – leader of the Narragansett in the late sixteenth century – said that his people had lived there “since out of mind.”<sup>812</sup> Anthropologists suggest that the tribe lived along the shoreline and in the hinterland of southern New England as far back as thirty thousand years.<sup>813</sup> In the seventeenth century, Welling’s ancestor Roger Williams, he pointed out in his autobiography, had founded “the first political community where freedom of worship was permitted wholly separate from the state”<sup>814</sup> in Rhode Island. This would be later echoed in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.<sup>815</sup> Williams, as Welling furthermore writes, “ended the shocking wars the Puritans had carried on in the name of God against the Indians.”<sup>816</sup> It is true that Williams was the main negotiator in buying land from Miantonomoh, sachem of the Narragansett people in 1635. Welling’s ancestor was also fluent in the Algonquin language, the language used by the Narragansett people. Even today, his book *A Key into the Language of America* – written in 1643, and the first study of a Native American language in English – is recommended by descendants of Narragansett People, as it not only comprehensively illustrates their language but touches upon the history of Narragansett people as well.<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>811</sup> The Bradley-Martin Ball, as other dressing-balls, was an event, but also a practice of networking for affluent people in New York City. By framing it as a charitable event to better the economic situation in New York City – as the organizer did – economical gains for various industries were marginal. In the participants’ self-assurance as a group of benevolent people it was certainly successful, as seen in various successive articles quoting them. The theme of a successful evening runs through Welling’s diaries as well.

<sup>812</sup> Robert A. Geake, *A History of the Narragansett Tribe of Rhode Island: Keepers of the Bay* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>813</sup> Ibid.

<sup>814</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 264.

<sup>815</sup> In 1791, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution was adopted. One of its main points is that Congress should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. See for further background on issues of religious freedom in the United States: Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Henry B. Clark II, *Freedom of Religion in America: Historical Roots, Philosophical Concepts, and Contemporary Problems* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1982).

<sup>816</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 264.

<sup>817</sup> Email July 27, 2017 from the Tomaquag Museum’s Executive Director Lorén Spears.

Clearly, this ancestry was important to Welling, as the reader of his late-autobiography *As the Twig Is Bent* gets to know.

Welling's major publication was his late autobiography, *As the Twig Is Bent*. The title is borrowed from an old English proverbial saying from the early eighteenth century, meaning that early influences are bound to have a permanent effect.<sup>818</sup> Drawing on and combined in this title were his two lifelong interests in education and in "defeating the spoils system"<sup>819</sup> to improve the city government of New York City and "not fall back into the slough of Tweed days."<sup>820</sup> For Welling, referring to the 'Tweed days' was synonymous with a disregard for an assumed decline in ethics in general in the 1860s, and the city officials' corruption in specific. William M. Tweed was the leader of New York City's Democratic Party political institution Tammany Hall from 1860 to 1871. Tammany controlled Democratic Party nominations in New York City through which in the end it dominated the government of the city. It was also named after a Delaware Native American leader, and thus illustrates the normalcy of cultural appropriation practices similar to the one depicted in the introduction.<sup>821</sup> The workers of Tammany were 'braves,' and its leaders were 'sachems' or 'chiefs.' Naming the democrats club's hierarchies demonstrates how white men's fantasies of Native American histories and identities were sutured into their everyday lives. In fact, this naming is an identity construction that deified Native American identities, as for instance the historic figure Tamanend was referred to by democrats as 'King Tammany' or 'The Patron Saint of America.'<sup>822</sup> This example illustrates an underlying logic similar to Welling's ethnic drag performance. Tammany utilizes Native American persons and terms as it takes them out of their historic context using them in completely different reference system for their political group. Euro-Americans, in other words, produced fantasies about Native Americans. But, for the analysis of Welling's self-writing something else is more important for the moment when we look at his self-presentation in *As the Twig* as a rigorous man that fought political corruption. It puts into perspective his self-making in diary writing, his reoccurring thoughts

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<sup>818</sup> Originally from Alexander Pope's *Epistles to Several Parsons* (1732): "Tis education forms the common mind, just as twig is bent the tree's inclined." Oxford Reference accessed July 3, 2017 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110350386>

<sup>819</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, XIII.

<sup>820</sup> Ibid.

<sup>821</sup> Tamanend or Tammany was a leader of the Lenni-Lenape nation in the Delaware Valley. Naming the Democrat's political institution as a consequence is comparable to Welling's going native practice due to similar historic circumstances. Tamanend took part in negotiations between the Native Americans and English settlers who settled in Pennsylvania led by William Penn.

<sup>822</sup> Tammany Societies were established in the early eighteenth century. According to historical legend, the leader of the Lenni-Lenape tribe Tamanend made a treaty with William Penn. It may have a historical basis in an actual treaty meeting at Shackamaxon, a Lenape town where Philadelphia now stands. See, Susan Kalter, *Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania, and the First Nations: The Treaties of 1736-62* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2006), 12.

on his heritage, his self-identification as a writer, and presents the landscape of the politics of a social reformer in the late 1890s.

When, in 1895, former United States Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz, and soon-to-be Mayor of New York City Abraham Hewitt proposed to Welling that he become “an original Fellow of the Academy of the Political Science of Columbia University,”<sup>823</sup> he was surprised. He wondered – having never “contributed anything in writing”<sup>824</sup> at 37-years of age – why they would propose such a position to him. Welling was a self-conscious man and he found later in life that he had developed from “abysmal ignorance toward sophistication”<sup>825</sup> throughout his career as a reformer. Part of this process of sophistication for him was without doubt to write diaries. Another part of this self-optimizing process towards sophistication was to publish. He did so later on, for example in educational pamphlets and articles. But most of these had been self-published by and for institutions and organizations that Welling acted for as chairman, or had been a member of. For instance, the National Education Association published “Student Selfgovernment”<sup>826</sup> and the National Self Government Committee released “You and Your Politics.”<sup>827</sup> Thus, his autobiography was important to him as he could present all his professional and cultural experiences he made and processed in his

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<sup>823</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 52.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid. XI.

<sup>826</sup> Richard Ward Greene Welling, *Student Selfgovernment* (New York: National Education Association, 1947); Richard Ward Greene Welling, “You and Your Politics,” in *Social Studies, An Orientation Handbook for High-School Pupils*, ed. William McAndrew (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1935).

<sup>827</sup> Other short articles and pamphlets are collected in Richard Ward Greene Welling, *Self-Government Miscellanies 1903–1912* – without a publisher it consisted of four reprints from the proceedings of the National Education Association (NEA). The first text in *Miscellanies* was “Self-Government,” a former speech given by Welling at a NEA meeting in Oakland August 1915. Second was *Pupil Self-Government as a Training for Citizenship* – a speech given originally at a NEA meeting in San Francisco, July 1911. Furthermore, this collection reprinted, Welling’s *Plan for College Social Organization*, for which he received the Owen Johnson Prize in June 1912, and finally, *The Teaching of Civics and Good Citizenship in the Public Schools*, which had been read before the NEA as well in Boston July 1903 and had been published earlier by Crist, Scott and Parshall Publishers, Coopertown in 1908. Other texts by Welling had been published in other institutions such as the American Legion; the veterans’ organization of the United States Army, as for example released *My Classmate, Theodore Roosevelt* (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1929). One of the earliest texts in print had been one of the two addresses in *Reform in Municipal Government: Two addresses delivered by invitation before the Massachusetts Reform Club*, (Boston: G.H. Ellis, 1894). Further articles, pamphlets: Richard Ward Greene Welling, “The New Outlook,” in *Tomorrow’s Americans, a practical study in student self-government* Ed. Aberdeen Orlando Bowden, Ida Clyde Gallagher Clarke (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1930). Richard Ward Greene Welling, *Civics as It Should be Taught* (New York: National Self Government Committee, 1933). Besides the above-mentioned articles and pamphlets, *As the Twig* mentions four more texts: *First Steps in Citizenship*, *Public Minded Education*, *Responsibility of Teachers in Civic Alertness*, and *Democracy in the Navy – An Experience in Discipline?*

diaries and scrapbooks for over six decades – covering diverse topics ranging from American civilization to his take on city politics.<sup>828</sup>

Welling's diary writing was a private and regular act of self-inspection. He wrote that he "followed wherever they took" him.<sup>829</sup> This must be understood as a representation of a distinct ideal of masculinity he pursued. In his autobiography, he admitted that he was a slow reader, and that he had "missed most of the greatest books and most of the poetry,"<sup>830</sup> which led him to conclude that he had been in literature "a good deal of a vagabond."<sup>831</sup> This rather restrained-sounding self-observation can however be understood as a display of his accomplishments. It indicates a virtuous life of self-control that enabled him to distance himself from the vagabond he once was. The next sections will address this maneuvering between various self-perceptions of masculinity with his ethnic drag performance and his self-writing in diaries. Welling wrote in his diaries in a short, brief, and eclectic style. They too were quite far from poetry, but rather comparable to a brief collection of annotations. To be more precise, the diary entries analyzed here consisted of short sentences, often with orthographical mistakes and most of the time incoherently connected to each other without causal relationship. Thus, not elaborated in style, verse or prose, Welling followed the fashion of self-writing – in the same manner as Thomas Augst posits for the diary writing practice of 'ordinary men' like clerks – Welling realized an ideal of one's self.<sup>832</sup>

Augst introduces 'ordinary men' writing diaries because it plays an important part in character development, self-reflection, and self-examination, and also to reinforce moral knowledge. They felt that they could narrate and master their own lives by writing. These findings correspond to Welling's practice of diary writing. But, in contrast to Augst's clerks, Welling did not need to accumulate moral knowledge and cite prominent bits and parts of philosophers. At the beginning of the year 1897 something else shows up in his diaries – a deliberation to "find a Narragansett to copy."<sup>833</sup> Welling utilized the combined practices of self-reflection, self-writing, and later on 'copying' and impersonation to navigate between various manifestations of masculinities – thereby realizing a white identity in New York City elite culture with the 'noble savage' stereotype. Welling's self-making as a consequence is furthermore sutured into a medical discourse – as in late-nineteenth-century physical health

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<sup>828</sup> The diaries and scrapbooks in the New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Boxes 28–55, are dated from 1876 to 1946.

<sup>829</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, XII.

<sup>830</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>831</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>832</sup> Augst, *The Clerk's Tale*, 17.

<sup>833</sup> Richard Ward Greene Welling papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Box 31.



and the flight to nature seems to hold the promise of individual – and moreover national – regeneration in an urban environment that was frequently represented to be in decay.<sup>834</sup> Welling's impersonation of Miantonomoh was thus a native performance that embodies an assumed raw and uninhibited masculinity. His diary in contrast reveals that this self-making was accompanied by self-examination and self-writing. With his self-writing, he could thus explore an alternate form of masculinity, which served as a counterweight to the impersonation, one that was registered as elaborate and intellectual.

The 'noble savage' stereotype reached its peak around the turn of the century and is often intertwined with European-American fantasies about Native American leaders. Variations of this stereotype were around since the time of the first contacts.<sup>835</sup> The image of a Native American as a noble savage to be admired and emulated was influential in American literature, culture, and politics in the nineteenth century.<sup>836</sup> One example was the secret society known as the Grand Order of the Iroquois, founded in 1842, which illustrates this fascination with noble native life and demonstrates how 'playing Indian' became an integral part of white identity. In this society, white men gathered to collect data on Iroquois life and to "shed [their] inhibitions and live, if only for an evening, the life of the 'noble savage.'"<sup>837</sup> There are countless other examples of similar groups and organizations in the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>838</sup> Welling's impersonation of Miantonomoh in combination with his self-writing practice reflected this embodiment of the 'noble savage' in a similar way. His self-making was able to celebrate Native American history while at the same time enacting a dominance of white Americans over Native Americans by imitation. This became even more important in late nineteenth century New York City, as it was frequently depicted in newspapers and in political discussions to be under pressure through immigration, unhealthy conditions, and widespread disease. Cultural appropriation of a Native American leader through ethnic drag could thus reconcile the perils of modern life, as white men also felt under pressure from cultural and technological changes in the city. As a consequence, the history of Euro-American territorial expansion was thus mirrored in Welling's ethnic drag as he literally took the place of a Native American.

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<sup>834</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 67.

<sup>835</sup> Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 104.

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>837</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 66.

<sup>838</sup> See Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 66ff.

### 3.1. “Looking up Indians” for the Bradley-Martin Ball

The Bradley-Martin Ball was a costume ball at the Waldorf hotel on the night of February 10, 1897 in New York City. Cornelia Bradley Martin, a wealthy woman who shunned a career in business or politics, and was seemingly devoted to a domestic ideal of wife and mother, organized it.<sup>839</sup> The reasons for putting on the ball are not quite clear. One author and critic posits that she wanted to help the fledgling nation’s economy after the panic of 1893 – a serious economical depression – that was still felt four years later in New York City.<sup>840</sup> According to Lloyd Morris, Bradley-Martin thought she could better the economy by organizing a great ball in the recently established Waldorf hotel, as “a ball effectively solved all social problems.”<sup>841</sup> The societal ball had been scheduled rather briefly after Bradley-Martin “reading her newspaper, belatedly learned that the nation was enduring a hideous financial depression [and] [t]rade was paralyzed; the misery of the poor was acute.”<sup>842</sup> Michael McGerr posits that the costume ball must be understood as a rivalry between two wealthy New Yorker families. In this reading, Bradley-Martin wanted to arrange a costume ball that would eclipse not only her previous efforts in organizing societal events but also surpass the famous Alva Vanderbilt’s Ball of 1883, which was “widely recognized as the greatest party in the history of the city.”<sup>843</sup> What is clear is that Bradley-Martin requested the participants “to array themselves for presentation at Versailles during the reign of Louis XV.”<sup>844</sup> The newspapers reported that on the opening night Bradley-Martin stood upon a velvet rug in the ballroom and “received salutations of more than 600 men and women one and all members of the society worlds of New York and other large American cities, all in their gorgeous robes and garbs personating those Kings and Queens, nobles and knights, and courtiers whose names and personalities take up pages of history, who, during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries pervaded the different countries of Europe.”<sup>845</sup>

Welling’s choice for presentation – an “Indian costume”<sup>846</sup> – thus clearly rejected the dress code. He declined to dress as a guest of a monarchic political system and instead went as a leader of a New England Native American tribe – one that was almost extinct when the

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<sup>839</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 10. Her father had been a millionaire merchant in New York; her husbands’ father was a banker from a wealthy Albany family.

<sup>840</sup> Lloyd Morris, *Incredible New York*, 239; Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865–1915* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 135.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>843</sup> McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 4.

<sup>844</sup> Morris, *Incredible New York*, 239.

<sup>845</sup> Bradley Martin Ball, *New York Times*, Feb 11, 1897, 1.

<sup>846</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

societal event happened.<sup>847</sup> The societal ball was the talk of the town as Welling writes in his diaries “every one talks nothing but Bradley Martin Ball (sic).”<sup>848</sup> Dances and societal balls had become an obligatory exercise during the Gilded Age in elite culture. Though it was unclear who would be part of this elite. Ralph Pulitzer writes in *New York Society on Parade*: “New York society consists of a whirlpool of tentative novices with a sediment of permanent members.”<sup>849</sup> In the early 1870s, families of New York’s traditional elite had established a Patriarchs’ Ball to dissect the former from the latter.<sup>850</sup> New York ‘society’ came to be associated with ‘The Four Hundred’ – the number of people who comfortably fit into the ballroom of William Astor, one of the leading families’ patriarchs.<sup>851</sup> Bradley-Martin however chose to invite 1200 people to the Waldorf hotel. According to the *New York Times* little more than half attended.<sup>852</sup> Welling was not an outsider to this society, but not part of the traditional elite. Nonetheless he was part of the extended New York elite cultural network, and accepted Bradley-Martin’s invitation. His costume choice challenged the dress code, but it also created a sensation that helped to distinguish him from the other participants in the ball. Welling did not appear as a king of the Early Modern Age that ‘pervaded the European continent’ – he pervaded the gathering of elite culture, through exoticizing and sensationalizing a Native American leader in ethnic drag.

On January 22, 1897 Welling wrote that he had “called on B. Jones and discussed the Martin Fancy Ball and my armour (sic) the Venetian costume and her mothers.”<sup>853</sup> Welling received one of the twelve hundred Bradley-Martin Ball invitations on January 23, 1897.<sup>854</sup> His choice of ‘armour’ for the dressing-ball was quickly found. On January 25th, 1897 Welling began “looking up Indians” at the Astor Library.<sup>855</sup> Whereas Natives had until very recently served primarily as a counterpoint to white American civilization, in the 1890s Native people “figured importantly as part of European America’s past.”<sup>856</sup> Welling indeed ‘goes Native’ and brought the stereotype of the ‘noble savage’ into elite culture. Moreover, he wrote about his efforts to self-fashion as a Native American. He discussed his idea of an ‘Indian costume’ with various friends, visited different shops to collect accessories and

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<sup>847</sup> Ibid.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid.

<sup>849</sup> Quoted in Robert Muccigrosso, “New York Has a Ball: The Bradley Martin Extravaganza,” in *New York History*, 75 no.3 (July 1994), 297.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>852</sup> Bradley-Martin Ball, *New York Times*, Feb 11, 1897, 1.

<sup>853</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid.

<sup>855</sup> Ibid.

<sup>856</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 64.

clothes he imagined a Native American leader would wear; among these a bead coat, quill hair sprigs, and leggings.<sup>857</sup> Huhndorf writes that one of the starting points had been the “World’s Columbian Exposition [that] forged [links] between America’s colonial past and the nation’s nascent imperialist campaigns.”<sup>858</sup> Welling’s deliberations in his diary and his depicted efforts show how performing white ‘Nativity’ helped to reconcile the nations’ past with one’s own life and to construct a white identity. This is an embodiment of a nations’ history, which moreover shows how individuals negotiated categories of difference to construct their temporary identities. Welling – in other words – found an armor in this white ‘Nativity’ that allowed him to navigate the hierarchies within elite culture.

Welling wrote in his diary that he was not only “looking up Indians,” but was also “trying to find a Narragansett to copy” for the societal ball.<sup>859</sup> His interest in the Narragansett people stemmed from his perception of an assumed shared heritage between the Narragansett and his ancestors. It is true there was a shared heritage between both people. Among the people that escaped from the first English colony in Massachusetts in 1636 to settle in what is now Rhode Island, were Roger Williams and John Greene, both ancestors of Welling. Both were expelled by Puritan leaders of the colony of Massachusetts and were under threat of impending arrest and shipment to an English prison. Williams believed in the separation of church and state and had thus been perceived as a threat to the newly established colony. In his flight to Narragansett land he founded Providence Plantation. The inhabitants of this stretch of land had been the Narragansett people and they had resisted English penetration into their territories up to that point.<sup>860</sup> As Welling was a descendent of Williams he, in other words, appropriated the historical relationship between the Narragansett and the Providence Plantation settlers by choosing to dress like one of the key people in the first encounter between both parties, Sachem Miantonomoh.

Welling’s ethnic drag thus operated as his heritage marker in elite culture. Miantonomoh represented to him his Rhode Island roots and his descent from the founders of Providence, Rhode Island. At the same time of Welling’s ethnic drag – as historian R. David Edmunds posits – Indian communities were marked with an unspeakable sadness as physical conditions and well-meaning reformers conspired to ‘kill’ Native traditions that had sustained Native Americans<sup>861</sup> for centuries. Edmunds writes that the 1890s also “witnessed a spirit of

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<sup>857</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>858</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 64.

<sup>859</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>860</sup> Robert Steven Grumet, *Historic Contact: Indian People and Colonists in Today’s Northeastern United States in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 130.

<sup>861</sup> Edmunds, *The People*, 345.

resistance and a remarkable desire to support tribal cultures into the future.”<sup>862</sup> It is unclear what Welling’s perception towards the contemporary situation of the Narragansett people in specific or Native Americans in general was, for all we know he seems to have at least sympathized with the Narragansett people. But, as his diaries suggest, this sympathy was connected to a romanticized and idealized version of nature in the image of the ‘noble savage.’<sup>863</sup> Coll Thrush posits “Indians and cities coexist at opposite ends of the American imaginary; one represents the past, while the other represents the future.”<sup>864</sup> Welling used the Bradley-Martin ball to self-fashion his past, which he saw represented in Miantonomoh. Welling as a consequence – as New York City, due to urbanization, migration, and industrialization, changed drastically – transported the stereotypically rendered wildness and raw nature of ‘savages’ into an elite culture event.

Dressing at the Bradley-Martin ball as a Native American – and not as a king, duke, or prince of a European monarchy – came not without consequences. But Welling brushed away doubts by the wives of his former colleagues from the Navy about his choice: “Mrs. David King<sup>865</sup> and Mrs. Jack Miller<sup>866</sup> and all of them say an Indian costume would not be de rigueur for the ball - Why not? I buy an Indian wig and some feather and debate with myself whether I will carry it out.”<sup>867</sup> Welling saw nobility in Miantonomoh, because he was a former leader of the tribe from his State of Rhode Island. The reactions he encountered beforehand indicate that his close circle of friends and acquaintances instead saw an image of an “ignoble savage” of the “uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured, and uncultivated” when he presented his idea for his costume.<sup>868</sup> While Welling contemplated his costume choice in his diary, the ball rose to the talk of the town after the invitations had been sent out. A reporter from the *London Daily News* hired from the *New York Times* assumed that it would “surpass all ever done before in that line in the United States,”<sup>869</sup> while others were indignant about the ball, as for example Rev. Dr. William S. Rainsford, rector of St.

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<sup>862</sup> Ibid.

<sup>863</sup> Martschukat, *Die Ordnung des Sozialen*, 210.

<sup>864</sup> Coll Thrush cited by David R.M. Beck, Rosalyn R. Lapier, “American Indians Moving to Cities,” in *Why You Can’t Teach United States History Without American Indians*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 212.

<sup>865</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 175. Most likely Commander King of the headquarters to Naval Base 4 - Montauk. The name of his wife is not mentioned.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid. XII. Most likely Commander Miller of the First Naval Battalion. Her name is not mentioned, either.

<sup>867</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>868</sup> Berkhofer, “White Men’s Indian,” 11, cited in Bonnie Duran, “Indigenous Versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity,” in Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 113. The image of the native as the exotic other came from European culture. The Wild Man was one of numerous mythical characters of medieval European stories and drawings. This symbol functioned as the negative self-definition of European culture.

<sup>869</sup> “English View Of It,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1897:10.

George's Protestant Episcopal Church, who feared an "ostentatious display of wealth"<sup>870</sup> that would set a bad example to the common people that had been affected by the depression of the 1890s. The President of the School of Social Economics George Gunton in contrast depicted the Bradley-Martin Ball as an event where "the rich should spend their money."<sup>871</sup> The Bradley-Martin Ball was in the newspapers for about 1.5 months and surely left an impact, if only by the constant coverage of it, not only in New York City, but also throughout the United States and internationally.<sup>872</sup> With everyday coverage beforehand with "detailed accounts of the costly preparations being made for this spectacular prodigy,"<sup>873</sup> it was no wonder that any deviation from the dress code would add to the impact of Welling's ethnic drag in the press. Welling chose to upset New York City elite culture; he appropriated Native American history by inventing a narrative in his diaries and through his performances. Welling utilized the linkage between his ancestry and that of the Narragansett people to invent a narrative that helped to navigate class distinctions in elite culture, as we have seen. The next section will illustrate this linkage in more detail to show how 'looking up Indians' was connected to the self-making of a white male identity in an urban metropolis.

### 3.2. Welling's appropriation of the 'noble savage'

Welling was born at Pojac Point Farm on Narragansett Bay. In his autobiography, he writes that John Greene finalized a treaty with the "old Indian Chief Miantonomah."<sup>874</sup> Miantonomoh – Welling writes – sold land "at the old Pojac Point Farm"<sup>875</sup> next to the Atlantic Ocean to his family. Unquestionably, he chose to dress as Miantonomoh for the Bradley-Martin Ball because he considered Miantonomoh as part of a deal his ancestors made with the Narragansett people. 'Dressing up' as Miantonomoh thus should epitomize his heritage. He furthermore depicted his ancestors as part of a political community that put an end to the "shocking wars the Puritans had carried on in the name of God against the Indians."<sup>876</sup> In addition, he writes in his late autobiography that his ancestors "made friends of Miantonomah and other Indian Chiefs, buying his lands from the Indians and denying the authority of England to charter away land belonging to the Indians."<sup>877</sup> His ancestors were the

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<sup>870</sup> "Dr. Rainsford's Advice," *New York Times*, January 23, 1897:2.

<sup>871</sup> "Talked on the Coming Ball," *New York Times*, February 4, 1897:7.

<sup>872</sup> The *New York Times* covered 25 articles between January 24th and March 5th, 1897. The *Chicago Herald Tribune* covered 55 articles with the Bradley-Martin Ball in it between January 23rd and July 11, 1897.

<sup>873</sup> Morris, *Incredible New York*, 239.

<sup>874</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 3.

<sup>875</sup> Ibid.

<sup>876</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>877</sup> Ibid.

opposite of these “old Puritan devils”<sup>878</sup> for Welling. Welling quoted one of these “Puritan devils” to distinguish himself from English Protestants. They – as Welling writes – burned Indian villages and killed mothers and babies and did so for the glory of god.<sup>879</sup> Thus he referred to his ancestors as friends of the Narragansett people as if they had acquired new friendly neighbors early in 1636 when Roger Williams and a small band of refugees from Massachusetts Bay founded Providence Plantations at the head of Narragansett Bay.<sup>880</sup> But, as Geake posits, it mattered little in time that Williams was friend and defendant of the Narragansett, as “their acceptance of the white visitors exiled from Massachusetts was the beginning of an encroachment that would bring the tribe to the edge of extinction.”<sup>881</sup> Neither Welling’s diaries nor his autobiography reveal any of the Narragansett’s history other than this brief historical sketch of an encounter between Miantonomoh and English defectors of the crown. There were no mentions on how the Narragansett had lost up to seven hundred people of the tribe, due to the first epidemic of smallpox in New England in 1634, nor other earlier or later violent and non-violent encounters the Narragansett had with Euro-Americans.

Welling ‘copied’ Miantonomoh for one evening – but he also reimagined colonial history by doing so. He picked out one event in the historic encounter between Euro-Americans and Narragansett people to make up a narrative that enables him to ‘go native’ for the dressing ball. Going native, as Huhndorf posits, is a “cherished American tradition, an important – even necessary – means of defining European-American identities and histories.”<sup>882</sup> Welling’s self-making in writing about and performing as a Native American leader thus shows the cultural networking that helped to shape and define European-American identities. It is a matter of less importance for this analysis if he did so consciously or unconsciously, or with good or bad intentions. Certainly, it did and does matter little to the Narragansett people as well. It was nonetheless significant for Welling’s construction of a white identity – because he could use his ‘copied–Miantonomoh–costume’ to navigate boundaries of class and masculinity in societal circles in urban New York City. In ‘going native’ with his ethnic drag he chose to invent a history of a two-and-a-half century colonial space and practice for his own needs. This colonial history was for the most part – as seen in section two – defined through violence against Native American people. Welling’s reasoning

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<sup>878</sup> Ibid.

<sup>879</sup> Ibid.

<sup>880</sup> Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America, Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1975), 199.

<sup>881</sup> Geake, *A History of the Narragansett*, 4.

<sup>882</sup> Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native, Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

in choosing to ‘dress up’ as Miantonomoh was thus an imagination of a Native American leader as a helping hand in establishing the colonial roots of the United States.

But, the omission of Native American history, and his misconceptions about seventeenth century colonial history of what became Rhode Island, is just one side of the coin. In fact, his ethnic drag practice also indicates a cross-racial yearning that came to be the helping hand to construct a white American male identity at the end of the nineteenth century. Deliberating, processing, and self-negotiating in his diaries if it is ‘de rigueur for the ball’ to ‘dress up’ as Miantonomoh as a consequence rationalizes his cross-racial yearnings. Kathrin Sieg understands ethnic drag performances as “figure of substitution”<sup>883</sup> that “exposes and disavows traumatic holes in the social fabric, and facilitates both historical denial and collective mourning.”<sup>884</sup> However Welling’s cross-racial yearning facilitated more than historical denial and collective mourning, as we see in Welling’s diaries – he produced and ‘invented’ a history of the United States and colonial England that suites his rationale of a white male identity in urban societal circles of New York City – while at the same time, about 180 miles north, ‘real’ Narragansetts still lived.

The Narragansett people numbered in the thousands<sup>885</sup> in the seventeenth century as they lived in parts of the present State of Rhode Island as well as in some adjacent areas.<sup>886</sup> In 1934 Princess Red Wing in the first edition of *The Narragansett Dawn* writes:

[F]or nearly sixty years the Narragansett Spirit has lain dormant, while civilization advanced on their old hunting ground [...] It was back in 1880 that our Indian lands were sold by a council of five men, who had to prove themselves, the only surviving Narragansetts. [...] Rhode Island’s General Assembly made a survey, recognized and paid about three hundred of these Narragansett Indians for their land, made them citizens of the U.S. and recorded the tribe as extinguished. It seems, they were, or they went to sleep. But you can not keep a real man down forever. Rhode Island had three hundred in 1880 of full blood, half blood, and quarter blood Narragansetts, the remnants of that once powerful tribe, who since that time have continued to live and multiply upon their ancestral territory.<sup>887</sup>

In 1887, the General Allotment Act passed. It distributed land previously held by the Narragansett to settlers and forced many Narragansett people to leave Rhode Island. In addition, the state of Rhode Island claimed that the blood of the members of the Narragansett

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<sup>883</sup> Kathrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 2.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid.

<sup>885</sup> During the Pequot War from 1636 to 1638 John M. Barry estimated the Pequots as well as the Narragansett nations to consist of 25.000 people. John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul, Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012).

<sup>886</sup> The census of 1890 reported that there “may have been some exaggeration in the accounts of the Indian population in New England” and the Narragansett people were “reckoned in former times, as ancient Indians said, to amount to 5000 warriors” and with about 1000 people in 1836 as reported by Albert Gallatin they were the most populous tribe of New England. Department of the Interior, Eleventh Census, 32.

<sup>887</sup> Princess Red Wing, “Editorial,” in *The Narragansett Dawn*, Vol.1, No.1, May 1935.



tribe was not pure enough for them to ever become federally recognized.<sup>888</sup> The omission of the actual living Narragansett people, whether in his diaries in 1897 or in his autobiography in 1942, was an important part of his sociability, or to put in other words his assumed benevolence. But Welling was not interested in the reality of Narragansett peoples' struggles. Extinction or assimilation of Narragansett people, as depicted by Princess Red Wing, happened simultaneously while appropriating their history by ethnic drag. Welling's ethnic drag performance for the Bradley-Martin and his preparation for the event as laid out in his diaries was thus part of the Euro-American settler colonial practices of omission, extinction, and assimilation. Welling's reference to this historic encounter did not acknowledge that *real* Narragansett were living in a neighboring state in 1897. The educational social reformer in other words chose to mock a Narragansett sachem – while contemporarily “the tragic dispersal of the Indians moved fitfully toward an end, with Congress debating their future as it might have discussed taxes.”<sup>889</sup> Welling might have been aware of the political decisions that had been made in regard to Native American presence in the United States, or not. There is no indication to assume one way or another. But, given the fact that he chose a Narragansett sachem for his ethnic drag and in addition to this being a member in the Special Committee on Indian Localities in the Rhode Island Historical Society, one can at least assume that he knew a bit about the history of the Narragansett people, and the living conditions of the people he chose to assimilate into his identification.<sup>890</sup> But, he did not write about Native American's histories in his diaries, or later in his autobiography – he wrote about himself.

Welling chose to ‘dress up’ as Miantonomoh because he wanted to honor his mother's ancestral lineage. By doing so he not only fantasized about the Narragansett nation's history – he dishonored a Narragansett leader, and with that their history, identity and culture. Berkhofer termed this practice of making-up fantasy histories and identities of Native Americans the “white men's Indian.” For white Euro-Americans like Welling the Narragansett as a people were a sort of “noble savages” since the Pequot War between 1636 and 1638 when Narragansett people briefly sided with English colonialists from Massachusetts against the Pequot nation.<sup>891</sup> After Miantonomoh understood that the English

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<sup>888</sup> Geake, *A History of the Narragansett*, 1.

<sup>889</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 11.

<sup>890</sup> Rhode Island Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Historical Society 1887-88*, Providence 1888, 7.

<sup>891</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams*. The colonialists of Massachusetts were frightened of the prospect of an alliance between the Narragansett and Pequot nations, because they would have been highly outnumbered. For this reason, the English colonialists asked the expelled Williams to negotiate an alliance between the Narragansett and English colonialists. Williams was the only man of English descent in the world that was fluent in Algonquin language and due to his former relationships with the Narragansett sachems he was invited to the council. His efforts to enlist the Narragansett in an alliance against the Pequot were not successful at first, but he

“came from a more populous Nation by far than all the Indians were, could they be joyn’d together.”<sup>892</sup> Miantonomoh visited the Bay colony with a Narragansett delegation and delivered a speech in which he stated that they would continue in war with the Pequot. As a consequence, the Pequot nation was eliminated as a viable polity in Southern New England, and the power vacuum in the area was filled by the Narragansett people, which became the biggest Native American tribe in New England. Again, the ensuing history of the Narragansett people, and their near extinction, was not of interest for Welling. Neither was the actual historic encounter he referred to when he ‘dressed up’ as Miantonomoh.

Welling’s interest was to self-identify as “a man at one with nature and in touch with his instinctual self.”<sup>893</sup> ‘Dressing up’ as Miantonomoh helped him not to appear as physically deficient, who his diaries stressed he often was.<sup>894</sup> This is one function of appropriating the clothes of a Native American leader. Welling romanticized Miantonomoh into a fearless warrior, and in this sense Native Americans became “vestiges of an original human form.”<sup>895</sup> He worked through this ‘fearless warrior’ and ‘noble savage’ stereotype in his writings. Welling writes how his “Indian costume” took shape: “Kohn builds out the shoulders, dyes to green the buckskin shirt and then the fur is too heavy and then I think I have things fixed right and some other constrictions occurs.”<sup>896</sup> He transformed into his fantasy of a Native American leader day by day – annotating the help he got from his friends with his preparations, being “glad [he has] avoided being made up by any women friend.”<sup>897</sup> ‘Going native’ in his writings was thus in fact a practice as well as what Michel Foucault posits as an “effect of an investment of power in the body”<sup>898</sup> at the same time. This investment apparently needed to be reaffirmed over the course of his life, as he dedicated a whole chapter in his autobiography to his Miantonomoh ‘dress.’ Welling’s ideal self was therefore also constructed through a romanticized Native American manhood.

In its representational character of the ethnic drag performance at the Bradley-Martin Ball – at a societal event – it was similar to even earlier “European depictions of America’s

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could secure neutrality. See Alfred A. Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 125.

<sup>892</sup> Cave, *The Pequot War*, 127.

<sup>893</sup> Bonnie Duran, “Indigenous Versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity,” in Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 113.

<sup>894</sup> Besides work-related notes, he wrote about his health, his eyesight, heartburns, or what is good for his tissue or not. Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>895</sup> Peter van Lent, “Her Beautiful Savage: The Current Sexual Image of the Native American Male,” in Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 211.

<sup>896</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>897</sup> Ibid.

<sup>898</sup> Michel Foucault, *Two Lectures*, in: Colin Gardner (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York, Pantheon Books 1980), 56.

Native – in, for example, Columbus’s distinction between the peaceful (noble) Arawaks and the bloodthirsty, man-eating (savage) Caribs.”<sup>899</sup> But, in fact, if Welling perceived Miantonomoh as a ‘noble’ or a ‘savage Indian’ is not even crucial, because both visions were “two sides of the same coin.”<sup>900</sup> Each one served “as a means of defining Western identities (either individual or collective) against an other, figured alternately as superior or inferior to oneself.”<sup>901</sup> This becomes evident when Welling wrote about how he went “wig hunting for Miantonomoh”<sup>902</sup> on February the 5th and confessed to his diary on February the 6th that “the states that my Indian costume passed through raise my hopes and then arouse my fears most erratically.”<sup>903</sup> It is unclear why exactly the different states that the “Indian costume passed through” caused these different emotional responses. But, the process of his self-writing practice about the anticipated performance indicates as Shari M. Huhndorf posits how “imagining Indians [...] has historically provided a necessary justification for colonization, including the annihilation of countless societies and cultures to make way for European settlement in the Americas.”<sup>904</sup> Welling’s self-writing practice was in fact reprocessing the historic genocidal violence, but this was not sufficient in its entirety for him. Welling additionally needed an expertise to acknowledge his choice, his emotions, his history, and his imagination. For this reason, he turned to an expert of anthropology who would help him in finding an “authentic New England Indian.”<sup>905</sup> The question that arises then is this: What is authentic for a late nineteenth-century social reformer who decides to ‘go native’? What does that authenticity stand for?

### 3.3. Welling’s authentic anthropological New England Indian

[S]ettler-colonial governments composed policies that argued either that Indigenous people were too defective to be repaired and thus should be displaced beyond the reach of civilization, or that they were indeed within repair and that state-sponsored programs, from eugenics to medicine to education, could meet this challenge. No Indigenous person needs reminding that identity was and remains the primary means of destroying or “fixing” Indigenous people in body and mind.<sup>906</sup>

The omission of Native American histories and identities is intertwined with the understanding of historic accuracy and authenticity in other state-sponsored programs as well. In Welling’s self-making practice by writing and performing it he had additional help from a prominent scholar of the burgeoning discipline of anthropology that helped to authenticate his

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<sup>899</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 6.

<sup>900</sup> Ibid.

<sup>901</sup> Ibid.

<sup>902</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>903</sup> Ibid.

<sup>904</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 6.

<sup>905</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>906</sup> Sean Kicummah Teuton, “Disability in the Indigenous North America, In Memory of William Sherman Fox,” in *The World of Indigenous North American*, edited by Robert Warrior (New York: Routledge, 2015), 574.

‘ethnic drag’ practice. Anthropologists like Frederick Ward Putnam, Franz Boas, and Lewis Henry Morgan studied Native American cultures and histories around 1900.<sup>907</sup> Franz Boas a student of Frederic Putnam was one of the apologists of modern scientific anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1941, W.E.B. Du Bois praised Boas in having “done more to clear away the myth of inherent race differences than any living scientist.”<sup>908</sup> It is true as Robert Wald Sussmann posits – Boas led a lifelong fight against eugenics – the statistics based methodology propelled by Frances Galton in the nineteenth century.<sup>909</sup> Galton tried to prove that the notion of ‘race’ is real and that racial difference exists – implying that there is a hierarchy among ‘races.’<sup>910</sup> Boas, on the other hand, continued to expand anthropology at the beginning of the twentieth century into what would now be considered physical anthropology. Boas countered physical anthropology’s fixation on strict static anthropometric measurement and fixed racial typological thinking.<sup>911</sup> He basically utilized what would now be called an interdisciplinary approach combining various scholarly fields of research on human societies. Boas, “disillusioned with German politics, academics, and academia,”<sup>912</sup> moved to New York in 1886. In 1896, he became curator of ethnology and somatology at the American Museum of Natural History. The same museum Welling went to for help with a drawing of an ‘authentic New England Indian.’ The Museum employed many anthropologists; and Putnam – Boas’ mentor – was one of them. Welling unquestionably went to one of the leading institutions for his inquiry, as the primary focus of the American Museum of Natural History and of anthropologists in the United States in general was American Indian languages, customs, and material culture.<sup>913</sup>

Although anthropology and reform-minded intellectuals challenged scientific racism, stressing a “diversity of the cultures that furnish the material with which the mind operates,”<sup>914</sup> the eugenics movement lasted until the 1930s and 1940s in the United States. In fact, western concepts of knowledge were – even with a new approach as propelled by anthropologists like Putnam and Boas – still applied to Native American nations, tribes, and individuals. Anthropologists still collected data on the physical measurements of Native Americans and gathered a diverse array of languages and customs to *identify* and *categorize* and *describe* people as distinct cultures. It is however true those anthropologists like Boas

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<sup>907</sup> Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>908</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “A Chronicle of Race Relations,” in *Phylon*, Vol.2, No.2, (2nd Qtr., 1941) 172–190: 190.

<sup>909</sup> Robert Wald Sussmann, *The Myth of Race, The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 147.

<sup>910</sup> Ibid.

<sup>911</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>912</sup> Ibid.

<sup>913</sup> Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>914</sup> Sussmann, *The Myth of Race*, 147.

now used inductive methods, trying to “trace the history and distribution of every single phenomenon related to social life of man and to the physical appearance of tribes.”<sup>915</sup> But the “West” was nonetheless still brought to those who could not – or did not – want to go to the West.<sup>916</sup>

Anthropology and its actors – in contrast to eugenics – assumed various and conflicting roles towards Native American policies and attitudes. As a consequence, as Baker posits a “unique and informative racial politics [emerged] that often pitted progressive white anthropologists and conservative Indian traditionalists against progressive Indian activists and conservative Christian reformers.”<sup>917</sup> However, it was Euro-American academic knowledge – propelled by its scholars – that appropriated traditional cultural knowledge for institutionalized spaces like universities, museums, and reform-minded societies. This knowledge was based on a belief in authenticity acquired through scientific accuracy on the one hand, and on the other hand on a belief in scientific accuracy that could produce authenticity. This practice of authentication – as we can see in Welling’s diaries – thus needs to be understood as a tool used to justify fantasies about Indians. The authenticity as produced by anthropology, along with Welling’s apparent need for an authentic drawing of an Indian, brings together what Achim Saupe posits as authenticity of the object and authenticity of the subject.<sup>918</sup> ‘Miantonomoh’ – and alongside him the making of Native American history, cultures, and identities – becomes the object. Like Native American items displayed in museums, Welling’s ‘Miantonomoh costume’ needed to be authentic. The authenticity Welling asked for is thus tantamount to the permission he needed from an authority, in this case Putnam. Thereby Welling safeguarded himself against being ostracized as acting improper in elite culture circles with his ethnic drag. But, the notion of authenticity was equally important for Welling as he utilized it to self-authenticate – to, in the end – become whiter and more masculine than ever before.

Welling’s preparation for the Bradley-Martin Ball as written down in his diaries outlines a self-image of an idealized Native American man in the making. In his recorded day-to-day experiences of raised hopes and erratically aroused fears in “the states that [his] Indian costume passed through”<sup>919</sup> a phenomenon of a distinct late nineteenth century ‘going native’ practice becomes visible. As he ‘dressed up’ as Miantonomoh for the Bradley-Martin Ball he

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<sup>915</sup> Franz Boas 1887, in Sussmann, *The Myth of Race*, 155.

<sup>916</sup> Martschukat, *Die Ordnung des Sozialen*, 214.

<sup>917</sup> Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 13.

<sup>918</sup> Achim Saupe, Authentizität, Version: 3.0, *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, August 28, 2015, [http://docupedia.de/zg/Authentizit.C3.A4t\\_Version\\_3.0\\_Achim\\_Saupe?oldid=107538](http://docupedia.de/zg/Authentizit.C3.A4t_Version_3.0_Achim_Saupe?oldid=107538). Last accessed October 21, 2017.

<sup>919</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

relied on elite culture networks in New York City. In particular, his former school friend, geologist and President of the American Museum of Natural History Professor Henry Fairfield Osborne Jr. helped him to get into contact with Putnam, the curator at the American Museum of Natural History when he met Welling on January 28, 1897. It was Putnam who had “been carefully working up the algonquin New England Indian for an authoritative drawing”<sup>920</sup> as Welling wrote in his diaries. With this authoritative drawing by “the past master of Indian lore at the Natural History Museum”<sup>921</sup> to go by and Putnam’s sympathy for Welling’s “plan to go as Miantonomah”<sup>922</sup> he began “copying Miantonomah”<sup>923</sup> in preparation for the Ball. With the scientific expertise of Putnam in effect, Welling as a consequence followed “throngs of would-be Natives since the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>924</sup> Going native thus, in Welling’s case intertwined elite culture with anthropological scientific expertise and thereby mirrored the popular plays, advertisements, and later movies that often depicted the ‘noble savage.’<sup>925</sup> Welling’s connections within elite cultural networks were as a consequence hardening already established stereotypes, and thereby, prolonging and upholding the omission of Native American histories and identities.

Anthropologists like Franz Boas, Fredrick Starr, and Putnam were connected with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which had been in ambivalent ways connected to mythological and stereotypical narratives about Native Americans. For example, the ethnographical reader *American Indians* from 1898 by Starr with a foreword by Boas wanted to separate fact from fiction and diversify the popular images about Indians and thereby in the end help to “enlarge their [the readers] sympathy with our native Americans.”<sup>926</sup> Starr as an anthropologist was also a collector. He collected and acquired various objects from Native American communities in Middle and North America. Starr became renowned and infamous for digging up an ancient burial of the Purépecha community in Michoacan, Mexico. His intention was to add the bones to the collection of the University of Chicago. This incident was only one in a long line of forced removals of burial remains of Native Americans. Remains were acquired, collected, and exhibited. Most of the time, these acquisitions were done with force and without consent of Native Americans.

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<sup>920</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31

<sup>921</sup> Ibid.

<sup>922</sup> Ibid.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid.

<sup>924</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 5.

<sup>925</sup> Bird, *Introduction*, 2.

<sup>926</sup> Frederick Starr, *American Indians* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., Publishers, 1898).

As a consequence, the scientific practices of collecting were connected to the ‘going native’ practice. Welling’s self-making in his diaries mirrored these scientific practices. He was “looking up Indians and trying to find a Narragansett to copy”<sup>927</sup> and eventually goes “wig hunting for Miantonomo”<sup>928</sup> and was “borrowing necklaces.”<sup>929</sup> The brief notations in his diaries were written to reassure him in what he was doing, as indicated when he wrote that he will “debate with myself whether I will carry it out.”<sup>930</sup> In his writings he contemplated – not the least about Narragansett people – but in fact nullified the material culture of the Narragansett as he was preparing his costume. In doing so he was not just going native but ‘going white.’ Welling utilized Euro-American verbiage and practices of scientists, a system of knowledge developed by counting, measuring, ordering, and classification. This Euro-American knowledge as propelled by paternalism, liberalism and assumed benevolence in science and everyday practices – was, in Welling’s case a tool that helped to reconcile his white male identity. Anthropology, certainly only one tool in disseminating European-American knowledge, was nonetheless, as Barker posits, central to the production of “colonial cosmologies,” or, in other words of Native cultural authenticities and inauthenticities that furthered colonial aims on racist grounds.<sup>931</sup> It was no wonder that Welling’s ‘authentic fantasy’ was connecting to yet another colonial Euro-American fantasy at the Bradley-Martin Ball when he “paired up with Pocahontas.”<sup>932</sup>

### **3.4. The noble savages’ partnering – White images of Native Americans in New York**

The practice of ‘going native’ is still until today very common in popular culture. Most recently Adrienne J. Keene founder of the blog and forum *Native Appropriations* brought again to the forefront discussions of cultural appropriation within contemporary media representations of Native Americans.<sup>933</sup> Keene challenged the appropriation of Native American names, identities, and histories in sports, tourism, and the food industry, as well as in fashion. Countless dismissive representations have shaped the American imagination of Native Americans since the first European settlers arrived on the East Coast of the United States. One of the reoccurring stereotypical images – until today – is based on Pocahontas. The historic figure has propelled countless myth and counter-myth about what happened between the (probably) twelve-year-old Pocahontas and the (probably) forty-two-year-old

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<sup>927</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>928</sup> Ibid.

<sup>929</sup> Ibid.

<sup>930</sup> Ibid.

<sup>931</sup> Barker, *Native Acts*, 20.

<sup>932</sup> Richard Welling diary 1897, New York Public Library, Richard Welling Papers, Box 31.

<sup>933</sup> See various blog-entries at <http://nativeappropriations.com> last accessed 09.19.2017

governor of Virginia John Smith in the early seventeenth century.<sup>934</sup> Steve Russell posits that “[w]e know Pocahontas was an Indian girl from an Algonquian-speaking tribe and she was a real, historical person. All else is contested.”<sup>935</sup> However what is not contested is that the assumed rescue of the English Captain and later governor of Virginia Smith by Pocahontas led to a crucial generative moment in the history of the United States, as Bird suggested by quoting Robert Tilton.<sup>936</sup> The stereotypical presentation, the mythological imagination, and the creation of an ‘authentic’ Pocahontas were thus a reoccurring act of what Bird calls White concerns and White fantasies.<sup>937</sup> This was observable at the Bradley-Martin Ball as well, as seen by Annie Morgan’s ‘ethnic drag’ as Pocahontas and her subsequent pairing with Welling. Both dressed up as ‘authentic Indians’ and as a consequence found each other at the ball.

Welling’s self-making was thus in addition based on the imagination and fantasies of Pocahontas, daughter of a Weroance<sup>938</sup> Powhatan, of the Powhatans Confederacy, at Chesapeake Bay south of the Potomac River, pairing with Miantonomoh, sachem of the Narragansett people. The ostentatious display of white fantasies of Native Americans were possible because both Pocahontas and Miantonomoh were perceived as ‘good’ Native Americans. Both supposedly had helped early colonialists and thus affirmed, “white men’s superiority.”<sup>939</sup> For that same reason the practice of ‘going native’ is still – until today – a popular practice because burgeoning anthropological and ethnographical inquiry at the end of the nineteenth century helped to authenticate and authorize depictions of ‘noble’ and ‘ignoble’ Native Americans in the United States. Or to be more precise, late-nineteenth-century scientific endeavors – combined with elite cultural rituals, like the Bradley-Martin Ball reenacted early colonial violent behaviors towards Native Americans – for their own self-making. This mode of authentication was reflected in Welling’s practice of self-writing.

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<sup>934</sup> Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 1.

<sup>935</sup> Steve Russell, “Who was Pocahontas: Frightened Child or Exotic Sexual Fantasy?” See: <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/events/who-was-pocahontas-frightened-child-or-exotic-sexual-fantasy/> last accessed 09.25.2017

<sup>936</sup> Bird, *Introduction*, 3.

<sup>937</sup> Ibid. White written in capitals – as Bird wanted to indicate the omission of a heretofore uncategorized subjectivity in history, which was produced through the practice of ‘othering.’

<sup>938</sup> Weroance, similar to the term sachem, in that both referring to leadership positions of their respective people. The Powhatans were Algonquian-speaking Native Americans. Most scholars agree that the emergence of centralized chiefdoms like the Powhatans emerged on the Lower Chesapeake in response to intensified trade involving Native Americans such as the Susquehannocks and Eries and visiting Europeans. After a more than ten-year fight with the Spanish from 1561 to 1572, which ended with the hanging of eight Powhatans a young man named himself Powhatan, and assumed the position of weroance of what would be known in the seventeenth century as the Powhatan Confederacy. Both Native Americans and Europeans recognized Powhatan as one of the leading figures in colonial America. See Edmunds, *The People*, 50.

<sup>939</sup> Bird, *Introduction*, 3.



Welling's need for an anthropologist's proof of what Miantonomoh looked like, his demand for a credible 'authentic' depiction of Miantonomoh, was mirrored in his writings. It reveals how Welling's notion of authentication was utilized to make up an identity that is not able to distinguish between his own white identity and fantasies about Native Americans. Depicting what happened at the Bradley-Martin Ball between him and Annie Morgan as annotated in his diaries and the newspapers best illustrates how Welling's Native American fantasies helped to construct a white men's identity. On a micro-historical level, Welling's self-making thus reflects the broader macro-historical epistemologies of race and gender. This was exemplified in the language used by newspaper reports on the Bradley-Martin Ball and Welling's diary entries.

Welling dressed in his Miantonomoh costume, "which required him to carry a tall war-pole with dangling scalps which on the evening of the ball, could not be insinuated into a closed carriage,"<sup>940</sup> and rode "to the delight of crowds on Fifth Avenue [...] to the Waldorf in an open victoria, looking very like one of the wooden effigies placed outside tobacconist's shops."<sup>941</sup> Perceptions of Native Americans in New York City did not include real people. Native Americans histories had been relegated to wooden effigies. Welling and most other guests arrived in the morning on a Wednesday at the Waldorf and descended upon a flower-strewn stairway to the reception parlor on the main floor. Following a reporter from Bangor, Maine the walls of the reception parlor was covered with costly tapestries and a Hungarian band was hidden behind a bower. Mirrors were embedded in the walls and "a big candelabra had pendant pouches of blue silk, bursting with a wealth of bridesmaids roses."<sup>942</sup> In the balcony another orchestra was stationed for dance music. The *Washington Post* quoted the London newspaper *The Echo*, indicating that the Ball had cost the Bradley-Martins 50.000 dollars, which is equivalent to almost 1.500.000 dollars today.<sup>943</sup> The *North American* from Philadelphia wrote, that "the ball from beginning to end was characterized by regal splendor, the decorations, the menu, the costumes of the guests and the general arrangements combining everything that might be looked for only among the kings and princes of royal birth."<sup>944</sup> Welling, over six-feet in height surely had left an impression in his costume, in the streets in an open carriage as much as by entering this "pageant of the past."<sup>945</sup> Welling did not mention

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<sup>940</sup> Morris, *Incredible New York*, 240.

<sup>941</sup> Ibid.

<sup>942</sup> "Superb, Unparalleled!." *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* (Bangor, Maine, Thursday, February 11, 1897; Issue 36.

<sup>943</sup> "Mrs. Bradley Martin's \$50,000 Ball," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 1890: 12. Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to Present," *Measuring Worth*, 2017.

<sup>944</sup> "A Pageant of the Past." *The North American*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Thursday, February 11, 1897.

<sup>945</sup> Ibid.

details about his journey to the Waldorf, but focused on meeting Annie Morgan, an American philanthropist, author of *The American Girl* and union activist. Welling wrote that he “danced with Annie Morgan (Pocahontas)” and annotated it with, “Ball a great success” and his “costume a great success.”<sup>946</sup>

Welling’s dance with Annie Morgan ‘dressed up’ as Pocahontas, again supposedly a twelve-year-old child from the seventeenth century, is the culmination of the white male fantasy about Native Americans. It indicated an appropriated assumed ‘Indian image’ leading to the only viable conclusion, of white men’s fantasies of two Native Americans from two different tribes, a heterosexual pairing. Welling in writing about the event and successive charitable meetings visualizes how this was connected to subjectivity, or in other words, how Welling shaped himself through the eyes of the quintessential other. In his diaries, he noted how he receives various congratulations “from appearance as an Indian”<sup>947</sup> and enjoyed that the “family seem pleased to find my costume mentioned in all the papers.”<sup>948</sup> Welling was pleased as well, as he posited when he read the newspapers and annotates – more than a week later – how he “own[s] topics [that] makes me second best costume.” He agreed “to pose in tableaux for charity as Indian Chief”<sup>949</sup> and remarked “Pocahontas (Annie Morgan) gets leave too from her grim Dad”<sup>950</sup> as well. This note on Friday, February 19, 1897 was the last time Annie Morgan is mentioned in his diaries. From this day on, until mid-March he referred to her in his diaries solely as Pocahontas. Welling had prepared to temporarily acquire an authentic Native American identity. As a consequence, his self-making of a white urban male intellectual was subjoined – besides ‘going native’ as a ‘noble savage’ – with the appropriation of a ‘noble savage’ partner. Annie Morgan was no longer Annie Morgan to him, but Pocahontas. Native American history, identity and culture had been substituted by a white heterosexual fantasy. Welling’s self-writing practice reveals this, but various other white cultural practices that were meant to be charitable added to the superficial display of Native American lives.

The *tableaux* Welling mentioned in his diaries, which he and Annie Morgan agreed to attend, were an art form that was revived as a theatrical form in the late nineteenth century. The *tableaux vivant* – living pictures – was a style of artistic presentation in which groups or

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<sup>946</sup> Richard Ward Greene Welling papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Box 31.

<sup>947</sup> Ibid.

<sup>948</sup> Ibid.

<sup>949</sup> Ibid.

<sup>950</sup> Ibid.

individuals posed for the duration of the display.<sup>951</sup> It was very popular in the semi-public space, known as parlor theatrical. This parlor game depicted for the most part historical topics, classic paintings, and mythological references. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a rise in theatrical *tableaux*. In New York City it became a popular leisure pursuit. The performance was different from other theatrical art forms: The actor's bodies froze in front of an audience causing a unique effect in time. The stage was filled with persons staring into a blank space, sometimes their eyes were closed and they assumed poses of dead people. It was probably similar to a still life that occasionally cracked when the actors moved only a little. Jackson McCullough depicts how *tableaux* became a phenomenon of popular entertainment and how it increased over the nineteenth century in its emphasis on the female body. On February 26, 1897, the Madison Square Garden Concert Hall's audience could witness several such *tableaux vivants*. One featured an "Indian Camp showing Pocahontas and Miantonomoh in full war costume."<sup>952</sup> Welling's diary entry reads as follows: "without rehearsing Pocahontas and I strike about four successful poses amidst much applause."<sup>953</sup> This theatrical illusion of disembodiment for an "Indian camp" was prepared by Welling's anthropological inquiry and in this way authentication of his Native American fantasy and the subsequent success of his performance at the Bradley-Martin Ball. With Annie Morgan's participation – who Welling already had transformed into Pocahontas in his diaries – the "Indian camp" was only one example of late-nineteenth century cultural appropriations of Native Americans. It denotes an obsession with the control of Native American histories, identities and bodies. As a result, Welling's identity was shaped by various popular and elite cultural techniques, his self-writing practice in his diaries prepared and propelled the 'white men's Indian' and thus contained and allowed to construct his identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Welling's approach of self-governance in education strengthened the link between individualism and masculinity by making a republican model fundamental to American political life.<sup>954</sup> He helped to shape and put forward the educational backbone of the cult of the self-made man in New York City that thrived in antebellum American culture in general, and which was "fed by a few dramatic stories of men who rose from rags to riches [and by] many stories of men who worked hard all their lives to buy a modest little house of their

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<sup>951</sup> Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon, *Between Still and Moving Images* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2012).

<sup>952</sup> "Beauties in Tableaus," *New York Times* (1857–1922); Feb 27, 1897; 9.

<sup>953</sup> Richard Ward Greene Welling papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Box 31.

<sup>954</sup> Erika Kuhlman, "Individualism" in *American Masculinities, A Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications 2003) 229–231.

own.”<sup>955</sup> But, in his self-writing practice and his self-making as performed at the Bradley-Martin Ball and subsequently at the Madison Square Garden’s *tableau vivant*, we can furthermore see how a white self was constructed through the omission, extinction, and assimilation of Native American histories, identities, and lives.

Lee D. Baker suggests that the anthropological concept of culture with its research on language and culture of Native Americans additionally was used to address the “race problem” in general.<sup>956</sup> But it was clearly not only the anthropological concept of culture that addressed the “race problem.” As we see with Welling’s self-making through writing about the ‘authentic Indian’ and performing this fantasy at the Ball and for a *tableau vivant*, we furthermore see how Native Americans were an integral part of how white men shaped their identities. Shifting between various stereotypes, Native American identities were relegated to tools and “as the embodiments of virtues lost in the Western world.”<sup>957</sup> Writing about one’s own life and achievements was possible for Welling because he had his diaries that he could refer to. The practice of diary-writing was thus a form of self-writing because it was here where he contemplated about an ‘authentic Indian,’ which in the end was a way of producing an authentic white identity. His self-writing thus indicates that he strived for an ‘intellectual masculinity’ as he wanted to be recognized as an author. To counter any possible doubts about his masculinity, he applied the image of the ‘noble savage’ into his self-making. This image was achieved with reimagining historic events – genocidal wars against Native Americans, as an example – into narratives of democracy and freedom, of which extinction and/or assimilation of Native Americans were integral parts in the late nineteenth century. But, this was not just solely reimagining Native American history. Welling’s self-writing and self-making illustrates on a micro-historical level how white identities and histories were forged.

Welling’s approach to self-government was far from unique at the end of the nineteenth century. The notion of American progress in the late nineteenth century was intrinsically bound to the obliteration of the history of “the other”<sup>958</sup> in order to construct, or probably even to perceive, and understand one’s (white) self in the first place. I understand this ambivalent interest as a dis-identification, which is also perceivable as a splitting between “which one is, and that which is the other.”<sup>959</sup> It is thus the self “as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other”<sup>960</sup>

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<sup>955</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women, A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1982) 29.

<sup>956</sup> Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 4.

<sup>957</sup> Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 6.

<sup>958</sup> Hall, “Old and New Identities,” 48.

<sup>959</sup> *Ibid.*

and this notion in addition “breaks down the boundaries [...between] those whose histories have been written and those whose histories they have depended on but whose histories cannot be spoken.”<sup>961</sup> In this chapter, we see therefore how histories of self were forged, and destroyed, how these processes necessitated each other in their ambivalence, and how even brief instances of self-writing and self-making, can reveal extinguished histories and identities.

Welling’s late autobiography has a considerable number of illustrations – depicting his interests and achievements in photos, illustrations, sketches, and newspaper clippings. The last picture stands out from all of these illustrations: It is a photo of his impersonation of Miantonomoh in front of a rural landscape screen taken in the Falk Studios in New York City.<sup>962</sup> He presented himself in this photo in an upright pose, with a headdress and spear, supposedly a sacred headdress and spear as it was worn by a sachem, looking out of the picture.<sup>963</sup> It is one of the pictures taken subsequent to the Bradley-Martin Ball in 1897. Welling’s inclusion of this photo in his autobiography thus stresses the importance of his ethnic drag practice at the Bradley-Martin Ball. His self-understanding in 1942 when the biography was published still rested on his white man’s imagination of Miantonomoh. Welling constructed an identity that – besides his intellectual quest in life – still needed the assurance of a ‘noble savage’ masculinity.

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<sup>960</sup> Ibid.

<sup>961</sup> Ibid.

<sup>962</sup> Welling, *As the Twig Is Bent*, 271.

<sup>963</sup> I asked Lorén Spears from the Tomaquag Museum in Rhode Island what clothes Welling used. She indicated that this is not the point: “I do not choose to dissect what he is wearing piece by piece as that is really not the point here. For us it is not a costume, it is our clothing or traditional clothing. He is being just as offensive as someone demeaning the African cultures in America with ‘Black Face.’ It is offensive to the highest level when people “pretend” and/or appropriate our culture, history, identity, arts, and lifeways. It is also highly offensive that he is diminishing one of our leaders/sachems in representing Miantonomoh in this thoughtless and historically inaccurate manner at a social gathering making a spectacle of a prominent leader of our community. It continues to demonstrate the disrespect and entitled view of the wearer.” Email from September 21, 2017.

## Conclusion

In the decades around 1900 everyday life changed significantly in New York City. Literary scholars have done most of the research on the practice of writing among North American writers up until now. Research shows that writers are analyzed within preconceived and assumed homogenous groups, such as clerks, ‘ordinary people,’ African Americans, or women – or as individuals representing a specific group on the one hand. On the other hand, literary scholars within the North American research landscape often focused on certain genres of writing, as for example novels, diaries, or autobiographical writings in general. Cultural studies scholars and historians of systems of thought engaged with notions of identity and subjectivity processes and focused on questions of discourse formations and aligning modes and technologies of the self, and thereby questioned the notion and production of ‘the subject.’ Both lines of research are sometimes informed by each other and proved to be thoroughly critical and influential in assessing how self-identifications were connected to various normative categories of difference. This thesis however argued for a broader frame of reference of categorizations and sources to historicize what I called the practice of self-writing; with the aim to gain a closer look at the space in-between an individual’s practice of (self-)writing and the macro-historical setting in the urban metropolis of New York City around 1900. As a consequence, the ‘self’ in question in this study was not synonymous with the author – as it was the self-writing practice that was channeling, adapting, and utilizing various modes of knowledge into many identities. In this sense, identities were fractured as writers pushed the boundaries of the possibilities of the self around 1900. If we destabilize previous notions of modernity – as Thomas Welskopp and Alan Lessoff did with their notion of a fractured modernity – we have to take into account that the subjects living in this time period, were necessarily fractured as well. But, the practice of self-writing was more than a practice of producing ever more identities, it was a constant becoming by disidentifying with given subject positions. The authors inscribed themselves into various genres – journalistic writing, diary writing, scientific writing, and novel writing. In other words, they occupied these spaces for their own needs and challenged in their own ways understandings of self-making around 1900. In the same moment, the authors wrote and thus inscribed themselves into a genre they transgressed the boundaries of it and by extension of their ‘selves.’ The self-writing practice of the four figurations as a result furthermore produced fractured identities, which were influenced by an all-encompassing political, cultural, scientific, and technological change – but not determined by it.

This thesis' approach utilized a practice theory influenced toolbox to answer the questions how writing has shaped identity, and how self-identifications were bound to normative categories of difference. The practice theory informed approach proved to be valuable, because it was able to combine heterogeneous sources in the cases under consideration. In fact, in terms of a multi-sited historiography, the self-writing practice in question needs to be contextualized broadly on a small-scale model. Starting with this small-scale model – four author's texts that shared no other linkage than my question of self-making through writing – thus sensitized for the possibilities and thresholds of the self around 1900. Following Carlo Ginzburg's understanding of a micro-historical approach this approach necessarily produces hypothesis, doubts, and uncertainties. These hypotheses, doubts, and uncertainties were a part of this study. Hermeneutically, they were intertwined with the body of source material available. As Lucas Haasis and Constantin Rieske posit – following Andreas Reckwitz – the methodological starting point for analyzing practices needs to implement an analysis of the element's materiality, historicity, and processuality.<sup>964</sup> The materiality of the practice of self-writing – the everyday practice of sitting at a desk, the writing utensil, the paper used to write something down, the body as it writes, the movements, or the specific writing places – all this was dealt with only briefly in this study. However, the materiality of the body was nonetheless mediated through the two latter elements, historicity and processuality. The logic of the inherent knowledge and therefore its historicity – as much as the routine and uncertainty and its processuality in the self-writing practice – as analyzed here, mediated the materiality of the body. To know oneself was to write about one's own bodily expressions, as seen by the four authors' invocations of states of excitement, fear, joy, shame, and observations of bodily sensations in general in their writings to communicate their ideas and stories of the self. Knowing oneself, knowing the self, writing about ways to become a subject was as much of an everyday process in itself as it was mediated through various other practices – ranging from cross-dressing, walking, reading, impersonating, and passing.

The self-writing practice – although one of the key self-references for all four authors was to be a writer – as a consequence shaped their subjectivity only partly. Knowing the self as mediated through the practice of self-writing – and this is one of the central results of this study – does not address one's own being in the world a priori. To be more precise this study showed how the authors (dis-)identified with normative categories of man/woman, black/white, abled/disabled, old/young; and by adapting different genres of expression, ranging from novels, medical journals, diaries, and newspaper articles, they furnished

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<sup>964</sup> Haasis and Rieske, *Historische Praxeologie*, 25.

temporary identities. Writing the self thus means that the authors abandoned and produced identities at the same time. In the 1920s, Edith Wharton described late-nineteenth century Victorian manners as an elaborate system of mystification.<sup>965</sup> This mystification was represented in the self-writings as the authors utilized a reservoir of stories of the self that lingered between elements of fictionality and reality, which turned fictions of the self into facts by – in Werther’s case inventing other personas, ‘dressing up’ as Native American like Welling, impersonating a hysterical woman like Bly, or delegating in Johnson’s case the question of subjectivity to the space of the novel altogether. The approaches by the authors varied greatly, but everyone utilized fictional elements establishing temporary identifications of themselves and others by storytelling.

Nonetheless statements of wanting to procure a ‘human document’ (Johnson), depicting ‘a plain and unvarnished narrative’ (Bly), impersonating an ‘authentic New England Indian’ (Welling), or presenting ‘a plain chronological statement of facts’ (Herzog/Werther) indicated the desire to tell a truthful account of the self in question. Miles Orvell argued that around 1900 a shift occurred in the arts and in material culture in which the notion of authenticity became a primary value. The self-writings of the authors here have shown that the search for authenticity influenced the self-making and othering processes to a great degree. People evaluated one’s individuality and the individuality of others and invested psychic energies in producing narratives of the self that suited the notion of authenticity. This, as a consequence, created fractured identities. To clarify what authenticity is would be virtually impossible, but what can be delineated are the effects of authenticity, as Achim Saupe posited recently.<sup>966</sup> Summed up, the effects seen in the self-writings practices here indicated and exemplified various planes of power relations at work. Moreover, analyzing the self-writing practices with a heterogeneous sample opens a window into who, at what time and place, has the opportunity to write oneself into being in the first place. The four text- and self-producing subjects in question were not analyzed by way of a comparative approach. But my approach nonetheless clarified the influence of a burgeoning system of knowledge of the self around 1900 in an urban metropolis, exemplified through ordering, measuring, categorizing, and differentiation. The authors’ self-writing practices produced subjects within and through their texts, which either adapted or countered these Western tools of quantifiable knowledge for their own needs and thereby moreover mirror utopias emerged. In other words, the self-writing practice opened up a space by which the authors – as much as the subjects of the texts – propelled new narratives of knowledge in regard to subjectivity. The authors thus produced mirror utopias,

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<sup>965</sup> Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing, Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 40.

<sup>966</sup> Achim Saupe, *Authentizität*, 2017.



or heterotopias, through disidentifying – or in Welling’s case *identifying* – with normative ideas of American individualism. With this reasoning space and place become intertwined or, as Michel Foucault posits, the idea of heterotopias by way of the mirror metaphor: “In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent – a mirror utopia.”<sup>967</sup> By necessity, analyzing the self-writing practices has to take into account othering processes, to gain a deeper understanding of American individualism around 1900. By doing so this study showed the importance of a historical analysis that incorporates the reciprocity between actual places and imaginary spaces, and introduces the mystical, imaginary, and fictive forces of subjectivity processes into historical scholarship.

The importance of New York City as the writers’ city can hardly be overestimated and played a crucial role on subjectivity processes around 1900. The assumption that the city was an agent in its own right nonetheless could not be confirmed. The changes in the social, cultural, and technological stratifications in New York City however functioned as a template for the self-writing practices. The changes opened possibilities for the writers to delineate, conceive, and reproduce new identities. As much as the self-writing practices shaped the city’s space as a space of imagination to become someone else and to change, the writings negotiated their identities in relation to actual places in the city, as they put forward stories about places like the Women’s Lunatic Asylum, the female impersonators’ headquarters Columbia Hall, the African-Americans’ center around the West Thirties in Manhattan, or the Waldorf Hotel. The places depicted here were – like the authors – massively different from each other, but showed however that actual places – as much as imagined spaces – occupied an important role in conceiving a self in the first place. This then again furthermore exemplified differences in the spaces for negotiation available for the authors. African Americans, female impersonators, and women’s possibilities to roam the city were restricted, which has been shown by research. The responses of medico-legal institutions, the legal and executive system, the mass press, and everyday encounters certainly differed depending on if one dressed up as a female impersonator to wander the streets or one impersonated a Native American in an exclusive elite culture setting. As a consequence the experience of movements through the city and its actual places influenced the notion of the self for the writers. On the other hand, this moreover influenced the faculty of imagination of other spaces within the city – shaping the possibilities of self-identifications quite differently for a wealthy Euro-American social reformer like Welling than it did for Bly, Werther, and Johnson. Some self-

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<sup>967</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 179.

identifications were as a consequence more successful, as others were not. In the appropriations of varying genres and knowledges in the self-writing practices of the authors the notion of the modern city or an American modernism is of little help, as it does not excavate the historical change in the production of the self in the city. Thus, despite all their differences the everyday practice of self-writing – and aligned practices – of the authors showed how important self-reflection was and how each one of them utilized New York City as a backdrop to negotiate their identities, or in other words how humans turned into subjects, by self-writing. The analyzed texts thus revealed the self-making alongside other everyday practices in the city and the inevitable importance of historical research on subjectivity processes through the self-writing practices.

Each chapter has shown understandings, productions, and refusals of the self and thus reflected on American ‘modernity’ in a new way. The self-writing practices have thus furthermore confirmed that the ‘modern’ self was formed by the interest and investment in observing bodily motions. As Olaf Stieglitz posits “stratifying and regulating modern societies rested very much on physical attributes and forms of subjectivation bound upon physical categories such as gender, race, ethnicity.”<sup>968</sup> Observing the self’s bodily expressions through writing was an act of reregistering, which thus not only questions the usefulness of thinking modernity as a distinct time period, but how the notion of the self is related to temporality in the first place. Each of the writers invented stories about themselves – emphasizing their desire to write about their past experiences – and thereby to propel their ideas of the identities they desired to become into the future. In this sense instead of seeing modernity as a distinctive time period, we can see – by applying a heterogeneous small-scale model of writers engaged with the self – how fractured not only American modernity was, but how people’s identities living in this historically rendered period of modernity must by extension also be understood as fractured. Modernity is often understood by the idea that various institutions, groups, and individuals mapped, zoned, categorized, evaluated, and dissected the city space and its inhabitants, which as a matter of fact – if one analyzes the abundance of social reform groups and agents, and all their writings that they left to posterity for instance – seems very plausible. But, as shown here with the analyzed subjectivity processes of four writers, what one can furthermore see is how new forms of subjectivity were forged and new knowledges of the self emerged, and how everyday practices like writing helped to form new relations to the self. As a consequence, fractured identities appeared that challenge the understanding of social stratifications in ‘American modernity’ as this study has shown.

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<sup>968</sup> Olaf Stieglitz, “Modernity in Motion – Visualizing Athletic Bodies, 1890s–1930s,” (Manuscript, 2017).

To focus on self-making through writing in historical research offers new insights into everyday practices on the one hand, and changing self-relations on the other hand. In other words, a praxeological approach is able to excavate historical change and furthermore adds new insights and unfolds new perspectives on the ‘modern’ period. Analyzing subjectivity processes around 1900 – for instance – can add new readings of consumer and labor histories, as Peter-Paul Bänziger has recently shown by examining diaries of city inhabitants in the German-speaking area around 1900.<sup>969</sup> Whereas Bänziger found that reflective work on one’s own biography and the relation of the self and the world declined in the diaries and was replaced by successive annotations of experiences, the practice of self-writing did not decline in New York City. Consequently, self-writing is not bound to what has been called ego-documents or as Ken Plummer called these types of sources: documents of life, created by the practice of keeping relatively coherent private records.<sup>970</sup> Opening the investigation of self-writing to a broader field of negotiations of the self, including the mass press, medico-legal journals, diaries, and novels, has shown that the self in its social interaction was not the outcome of determined structures but intertwined with the efficacy of medico-legal discourse. It showed the fluidity of spaces and individuals in New York City around 1900, and how people found new ways to express themselves and make sense of themselves in a rapidly changing world. It thus highlighted the complexity of agency, which is embedded in the practice of conceiving a viable ‘I’ in so-called modern times. This study has shown how writers made sense of their individuality, but applying a praxeological approach also entails asking why people wanted to become someone (else), as Dagmar Freist postulated.<sup>971</sup> In this way research on subjectivity processes heightens also the attention to processes and forces of power.

To excavate the processes of power this study applied what I called a transsectional approach in combination with a practice approach. The self-writing practice depicted that people in varying ways had to learn to relate to the language and categories medico-legal discourse solidified. The authors did so by (dis-)identifying with categories that were borne out of the complex nexus of the practices of physicians, psychologists, lawyers, anthropologists, and eugenic scientists. I chose to analyze the authors’ self-writing practices not to delineate and differentiate between minority and majority subjects. Although as postcolonial studies have shown a strategic essentialism is sometimes needed for groups to

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<sup>969</sup> Peter-Paul Bänziger, “Die Moderne als Erlebnis. Eine Geschichte der Konsum- und Arbeitsgesellschaft, ca. 1850–1940” (Habilitationsschrift, Philosophisch-Historische Fakultät der Universität Basel, 2017).

<sup>970</sup> Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life, An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983).

<sup>971</sup> Dagmar Freist, Final Comment, Historical Praxeology. Quo Vadis? An International Conference on Historical Practices, Universität Oldenburg, 17.03.2017.

mobilize as a political tactic, for the analysis of the self-writing practice this was of lesser importance. Nonetheless, by applying a small-scale model of four figurations of writers with a practice approach and a transsectional approach, this study has been able to take into account the materiality of the bodies, as represented in the writings, through various cross-race, cross-gender, cross-class, and cross-age desires. Here the differentiation between minority and majority subjects is of lesser importance, because this study focused on the processes of subjectivity and thereby on the forces of power. It is not helpful to distinguish minority from majority subjects because with a practice theory toolbox in combination with a transsectional approach one sees how the authors here switched between self-identifications. For example, Werther writes under a male alias for the *Medico-Legal Journal* at daylight, which could be considered a majority subjectivity and changes to his Jennie June personae at nighttime, wandering as a cross-dresser through the streets of New York City, which could be perceived as a minority subjectivity. To understand historical change and to read and understand the complexity of individual and collective experiences with a practice theory influenced transsectional approach Werther's authorial usage of two male aliases can then be better regarded as a majority practice rather than a majority subjectivity for instance. In order to be able to perform and write *truthfully* about the minority practice of cross-dressing, Werther self-fashioned as a writer, who in other words wrote a case study about himself. Becoming a woman can thus, as a consequence, only be analyzed by understanding how people around 1900 in New York City became a man. Or, how individuals like white social reformers such as Welling solidified and enhanced their whiteness can in the same manner only be analyzed historically when considering how 'ethnic drag' worked at the end of the nineteenth century. This approach sensitized furthermore for how a so-called women journalist adapted the male gaze of the medical understanding of hysterical women, to bring attention to the lived realities of marginalized women, as Nellie Bly did. But this approach was also able to excavate how identities were forged and conceived in literature, which had implications for the lived realities of black subjectivities, as it was the case with James Weldon Johnson's protagonist, the Ex-Colored Man. For this reason, a practice theory informed approach is able to highlight the spaces in-between the micro- and macrohistories of subjectivity processes. This study has shown the importance of historical scholarship that takes seriously the forces and processes of power that emerged in the spaces in-between that were constituted by the frictions created between the real and the fictional, fact and fiction, imitation and authenticity, and space and place. In this way, historical scholarship can gain new insights into the history of subjectivity and urban history and furthermore can be fruitful for further research and exercise an approach that is more than a buzzword, interdisciplinarity. One key subject for further research for instance would be to turn the focus to the subjectivity processes of economic

individualism in the American metropolis. Because another result of this study seems to be that the contemporarily favored assumption, as put forward by late nineteenth century historian Frederick Turner, that the western frontier of the United States was closed – and hence the bulk of the Northern American continent discovered and conquered – meant that new frontiers emerged and were opened up to discovery and conquest: The hidden spaces of cities, the bodies therein, and the foreboding of the economical self that has to sell – not only its labor power – but increasingly its own self as imagined by others and *oneself*. Taking furthermore into account the rapid technological change and the uncertainty about what counts as fiction or fact – this bears a resemblance to sectarian conflicts about identity in Western societies, as for example contended in contemporary discussions about identity politics. A history of the present – for that very reason could inform today's arguments about – and problems with – the concept of identity – as it highlights how categories were conceived and produced in the first place.

## Abstract

Meine Dissertation untersucht die Vielfalt und Uneindeutigkeit urbaner Identitäten in New York City um 1900. Mit einem praxeologischen und transsektionalen Ansatz werden die Praktiken des Schreibens und die damit verbundenen Selbst-Bildungspraktiken von vier Schriftsteller\_innen analysiert. Die vier Ausgangsfiguren für meine Analyse sind erstens Ralph Werther, ein Rechtsanwaltsgehilfe, der unter dem Namen Jennie June auch als »Female Impersonator« und »Cross-Dresser« in New York unterwegs war und dies in autoethnographischen Texten im *New York Medico-Legal Journal* festhielt (1918–1922); zweitens Elizabeth Jane Cochran, die unter ihrem Pseudonym Nellie Bly zu einer der bekanntesten Journalistinnen der vorletzten Jahrhundertwende wurde. Sie imitierte hysterische Frauenkörper, um auf Blackwell Island in das dortige Women's Lunatic Asylum zu gelangen. Ihr Weg durch New York ins Asylum wurde in zwei Artikeln in der *New York World* veröffentlicht (1887). Drittens James Weldon Johnson, Diplomat, Komponist, Politiker und Schriftsteller. Er beschrieb in einer fiktiven Autobiographie das Leben eines »Ex-Colored Man« (1912) und dadurch auch die Fiktionalität und Realität der so genannten Color Line in den USA. Viertens der »Self-Government« Reformer und Politiker Richard Ward Greene Welling, der sich nach extensiver Vorbereitung – festgehalten in seinem Tagebuch – auf dem Bradley-Martin Ball (1897) als Miantanahoh, Sachem der Narragansett, verkleidete. Diese vier Schriftsteller\_innen erschufen reale und imaginierte Territorien von »New Women«, »Ex-Colored Men«, »Native Americans«, »Androgynes« und »Fairies«. Um die Praktik des Schreibens in Bezug auf die Selbst-Bildungsprozesse zu untersuchen, werden Tagebücher, Romane, Autobiographien, Artikel in Tageszeitungen, Aufsätze in Fachzeitschriften, sowie die Korrespondenzen der Schriftsteller\_innen herangezogen. Die in diesen Texten beobachtbaren Selbst-Bildungen stehen in einem wechselseitigen Verhältnis zu den insbesondere durch medizinische und juristische Diskursfelder hervorgebrachten Subjektpositionen. Die umfassenden politischen, kulturellen und technologischen Veränderungen in New York City um die vorletzte Jahrhundertwende beeinflussten die Selbstbildungspraktiken – aber determinierten diese nicht. Ein zentrales Ergebnis der Studie ist somit, dass Lesarten der Moderne als stabile, historische Zeitperiode – unter Berücksichtigung der Subjektivierungsprozesse – wenig hilfreich sind. Vielmehr erscheint die Moderne so eher als Feld von Diskontinuitäten denn als ein monolithischer Block – bevölkert von instabilen, zerrissenen und gebrochenen Individuen. Zugleich haben die Schriftsteller\_innen in produktiver Art und Weise unterschiedliche Schreibgattungen genutzt und so durch ihre spezifischen Praktiken des Schreibens temporäre Identitäten ausgebildet, verworfen, imitiert, verändert, erfunden und neu justiert. Dadurch wird zugleich eine neue

Lesart des Amerikanischen Individualismus um 1900 vorgeschlagen, die literaturwissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen – insbesondere in Bezug auf die Verhältnisse zwischen Fiktionalität und Realität, Imitation und Authentizität sowie Fakt und Fiktion von Identitätsbildungen – für eine Geschichte der Selbst-Bildungen nutzbar macht. In einer Verbindung von Mikro- und Makrogeschichte werden so nicht nur die dazwischenliegenden Spannungsverhältnisse und Machtbeziehungen deutlich, die die Praktiken des Schreibens und der Selbstbildungsprozesse beeinflussten, sondern wird darüber hinaus die Relevanz der imaginierten Räume und realen Orte für die Stadtgeschichte deutlich.

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## **Binding Agreement**

Hiermit versichere ich verbindlich,

1. dass ich die Dissertation zur Erlangung des philosophischen Doktorgrades selbstständig verfasst, alle verwendeten Quellen und Hilfsmittel angegeben habe,
2. dass ich die Arbeit noch in keinem anderen Prüfungsverfahren vorgelegt, oder Teile daraus anderweitig vorgelegt habe,
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